

# interzone

JUNE 2001

NUMBER 168

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NEW STORIES BY

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PLUS AN INTERVIEW WITH

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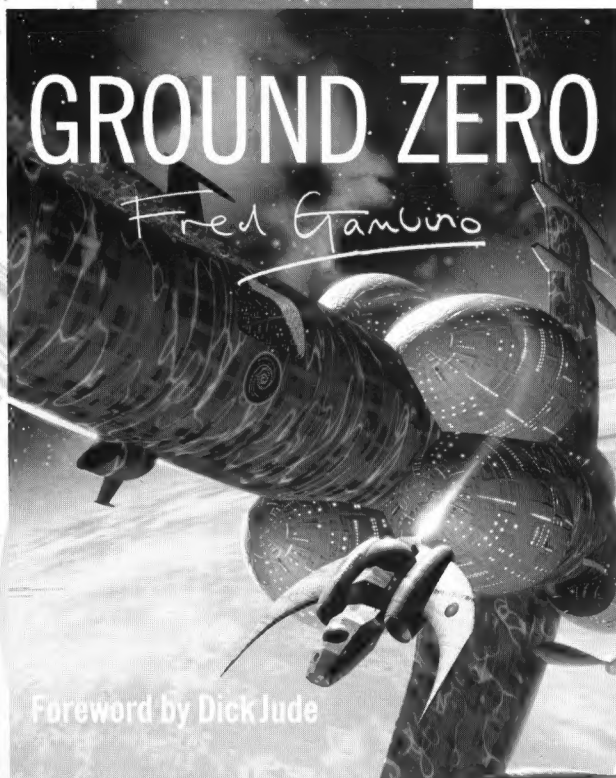
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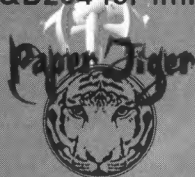
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

JUNE 2001

Number 168

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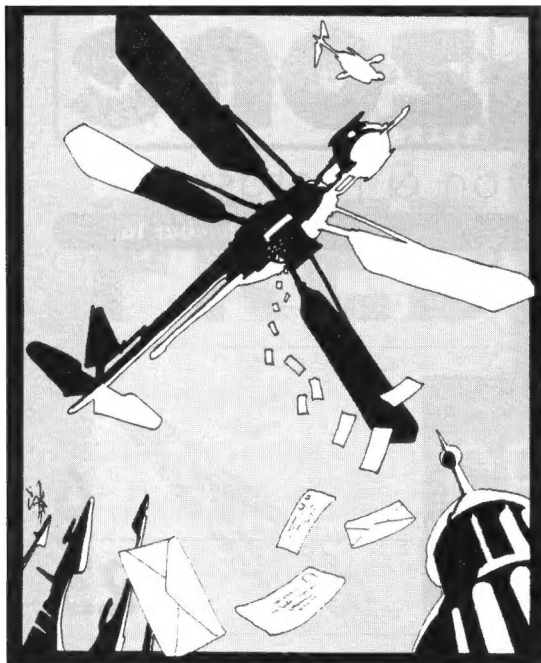
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## Flagship Story?

Dear Editors:

Whilst I didn't agree with the entirety of Adrian Fry's letter in *Interzone* 165 (love your acerbic film reviews, Nick, keep it up!) I am afraid that I can't help but sympathize strongly with certain sentiments expressed by Mr Fry. I too was extremely disappointed to see that your "flagship story" for the new millennium (George Zebrowski's "Catch the Sleep Ship," *IZ* 163) was a rather bloated and self-reflexive work that seemed to me to be a pathetic attempt by the author to validate the existence of science fiction as a whole, rather than further it with exciting new ideas for a new millennium. The Images of old sf publications which were dotted around the text just served to reinforce this.

The fact that George Zebrowski (and you also, worryingly, since you published the story) seem to believe that the sf "community" (another irritatingly self-reflexive buzzword) needs this millennial "well done, lads, keep going" just seems to indicate to me a complete lack of faith in the validity of the genre and in its ideals. The whole story just stank of someone who took what he was writing far too seriously, yet at the same time was wondering: "what am I doing, I'm writing science fiction, for god's sake!"

The best sf books and stories are never introverted, they are always self-assured and describe bright, new, ideas and powerful futures which are populated by casts of believable characters, responding like thinking people. Authors like Frank Herbert and (to jump a few decades) William Gib-

son are perfect examples of authors who provide the antithesis to Zebrowski's ideas, although I'm sure most readers realized that anyway.

Aside from that, I also thought the story itself, regardless of content, was badly written (any story featuring a character called "the old sci-fi writer" sets those alarm bells going from page one) and what possessed you to publish it was beyond me. I also agreed with Mr Fry about the Paul Di Filippo story, "Return to Cockaigne." Sheer bollocks, to put it less mildly than he.

So, please, please, please, *Interzone*, keep publishing brilliant, thought-provoking, forward-looking sf by authors such as Paul J. McAuley, Geoff Ryman and James Lovegrove, and stop printing insecure nonsense like Zebrowski's effort.

**Paul Davies**

London

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## Defending Paul McAuley

Dear Editors:

Tom Arden's review of Paul McAuley's new novel, *The Secret of Life* (*IZ* 166), uncharacteristically overlooks the many strengths of the book. Arden sees the novel as a superficial technothriller, full of cardboard characters and glorifying science above all other human endeavours. I believe it is a book that no one interested in contemporary hard sf should miss. Granted, it is not perfect, but it stands out from the competition in three important respects.

To begin with, it's the first work of sf to deal with the extremely important real-world issue of the commercialization of biological knowledge. Second, McAuley's "Chi" is a fine contribution to the great sf tradition of weird and wonderful Martian life-forms. Third (and most significantly), as the novel develops, the portrait of the heroine becomes an exploration of the human price of an outstanding scientific career. It is for these reasons that, as I said in my review of the novel in *Foundation* 81, *The Secret of Life* will be a strong contender in this year's awards.

**Jennifer Swift**

Oxford

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## 2000 Popularity Poll

Dear Editors:

My top three stories of last year (in no particular order):

"La Vampiresse," Tanith Lee  
"Singing Each to Each,"

Paul Di Filippo  
"We All Saw It," Mat Coward

Not far behind (ditto):

"The Suspect Genome,"

Peter F. Hamilton

"Antibodies," Charles Stross

"Impossible Encounters" (collectively),  
Zoran Zivkovic

Another dozen-and-a-half linger in the mind as above average – about the same number as last year, though I think the average level went up a notch. There's a steadily growing bunch of names that very rarely disappoint: Jean-Claude Dunyach, Alastair Reynolds, Paul McAuley, Chris Bockett and Alexander Glass in 2000. Cory Doctorow and M. Shayne Bell

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were new names to me that I hope to see again. I really did not like Eugene Byrne's "HMS Habakkuk. It's the only story for as long as I can recall that I wish you hadn't printed.

And then there's Richard Calder. "Malignos" was excellent, but "Impakto" and the "Lord Soho" stories have diminished it for me. Calder has gone off in a direction which I have no enthusiasm for following. Mind you, I still devour each and every single word he writes; his prose is always a joy to read. Every now and again he pulls out a word you weren't expecting. There's a moment of surprise, then reflection, and then the realization that – of course – that was precisely the right word for the job. (Eric Brown, by contrast, is a talented writer who frequently attempts something similar but usually leaves me with the impression of someone straining for effect.) I just wish Calder would find something else to write about.

Anyway, I hope you'll continue to experiment and take risks that don't jeopardize *IZ*'s continued existence: guest editors, crossovers with other magazines, author specials, long stories spread over two issues, story series, whatever. Some have worked for me, others haven't. But it would be

disappointing if a magazine devoted to the literature of change didn't encourage the odd mutation.

**Alasdair Montgomery**  
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## Richard Calder

Dear Editors:

I've just read the April *Interzone*. As for "Roach Motel," it's like Calder's other fiction: vivid, memorable, and with a strong narrative drive, but concerned at its core with pretty vile and perverse things. So if you took a poll on "Calder, yes or no," I might have to vote in both categories!

But I do like in general your idea of doing series of short stories or novellettes. I guess in part that's because I always liked the idea of a fiction magazine having "another thrilling adventure of..." In fact, I think series have been *Interzone*'s strongest suit (along with the non-fiction), particularly the "Back in the USSA" series by Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne and (in

my humble opinion) the best story you have run in *IZ*, Brian Stableford's "The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires."

**Martin Morse Wooster**  
Silver Spring, Maryland  
mmwooster@yahoo.com

## J. G. Ciccone

Dear Editors:

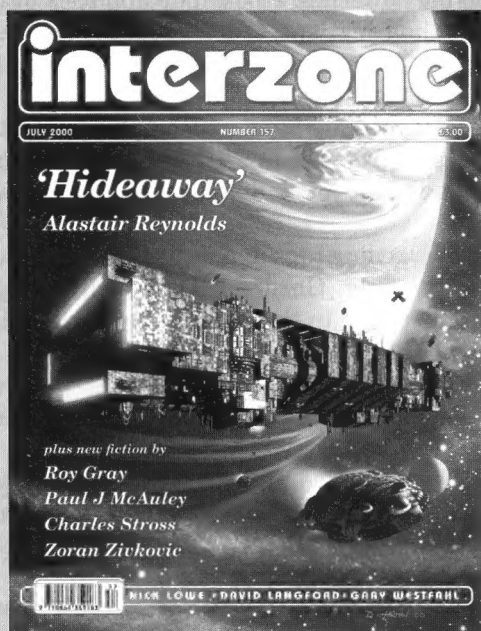
I was looking at the *Guardian* recently, and spotted the title of Madonna's new tour show: "Drowned World." She's always been a rather Ballardian figure, but with this title, it becomes evident who's scripting her, and that he's got bored with the charade and is being more obvious.

Will we see more Marilyn Monroe impersonations? Empty swimming pools? Of course, you could always get J. G. Ballard to review the show for *Interzone*...

**John Dallman**  
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# BSFA Awards 2001

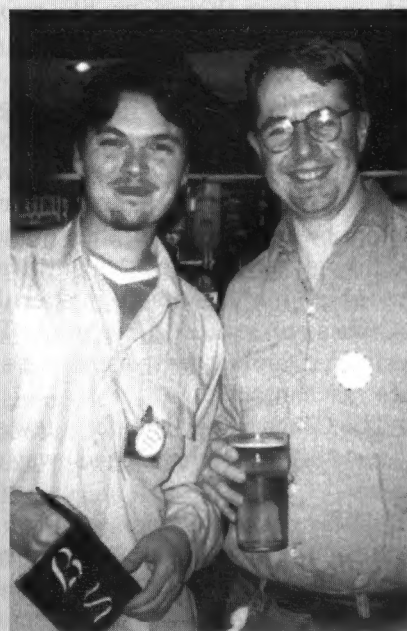


Winner of The 2001 BSFA Award for Art was our very own Dominic Harman for his cover illustrating Alastair Reynolds's "Hideaway" (left).

Dominic was thrilled with the award and celebrated in style – "Eric Brown, Alastair Reynolds and his girlfriend, Josette, Tony Ballantyne and John Meaney were buying me loads of drinks so I was merry to say the least! [hic]." He went on, "having *IZ* as a platform, to show and develop my style has been so valuable to me. I don't think I would have achieved my current standard without your regular commissions."

We hope Dominic's artwork will continue to feature in *Interzone*. His website is under development. Meanwhile, you can find his work on the web on Eric Brown's site – <http://website.lineone.net/~ianw/ericbrown/harman.htm>

Below: Dominic Harman (left) with his BSFA award, and Alastair Reynolds.





# Babylon Sisters

*Paul Di Filippo*

## 1 The Last Chapter

We – that was Babylon’s agent, the Sisters and me – uncurled ourselves out of six hidden Planckian dimensions, slid down a lightyear or so of string, and popped out into the familiar four-dimensional Riemannian spacetime.

“Holy Moten,” I said.

“That about sums it up,” said Jezzie.

“My sentiments exactly,” chimed Judy.

So said the Sisters, then fell silent. They seemed rather lost, away from their TAPS, like two halves of a severed snake.

Ace, Babylon’s semi-autonomous extension, regarded us coldly. “We trust you three will not advertise this trip. The consequences for you would not be pleasant.”

With that frigid warning, Ace went to the control-board’s ears and whistled us a course back to Babylon, distant by one transition, then an hour under ion drive.

Through space, then soupy atmosphere we skittered, the cabin’s inhabitants all in speculative silence.

Once again standing free under Babylon’s dome, Ace perked up, and likewise the Sisters, as they came back into TAP contact.

“The Conservancy is in for a few surprises now,” said Ace cryptically, then hastened away on his master’s business.

The Sisters and I made for home.

Once back in our communal burrow-cum-nest, Judy and Jezzie disappeared, leaving me alone. I had never felt so confused in my life. I sat for a long time, just trying to piece everything together into a coherent story.

Then, without even quite meaning to, I began to write:  
First I killed the diplomat –

## 2 Interruption Number One

“Hey, Sandy – what are you doing to the wall?” questioned Jezzie.

“Yeah,” said Judy. “You’re making graffiti all over our nice clean pleasureparlour walls.”

Squatting on my haunches, I looked up and back at the two women who had just entered. Still, after all these months together, the only way I could tell them apart was the purpling love-bite on Judy’s neck.

Into my lap I dropped my hand which held the stick of charcoal I had taken from the artists’ co-op a month ago. I tried to summon up as much dignity as these two had left me.

“I am not just scrawling tags and icons like the kids do on the underside of the Gardens. I am writing. And because there’s no paper in this stupid city, I’m writing on the walls.”

“Writing?” said Judy, then paused.

“Oh, I see,” said Jezzie, simultaneously enlightened. “How quaint. And what are you ‘writing?’”

“The story of how I ended up here, and what we just went through. I thought that it might help me make sense of everything.”

“Good luck,” Judy said.

“You know the walls will just absorb it,” volunteered Jezzie. “Look, your first sentence is gone already.”

I looked. Sure enough, the wall was now as featureless as the methane ocean outside our dome.



"Well, I guess I'd better write fast then." I turned back to the wall, charcoal re-poised.

"One minute," said Jezzie. "Doesn't 'writing' traditionally presuppose an audience?"

"Yeah, I guess –"

"Give us a minute," added Judy, "and we'll learn to read."

"Then we can help you understand."

I laughed, somewhat bitterly, I feared. "More help like yours I don't think I need."

"Oh, come on now."

"We saved you from a life of boredom."

Wearily, I shook my head. I knew the Sisters would do what they wanted no matter what I said. So I waited while they TAPPED.

"Go ahead."

"We're ready now."

I brought the tip of my black stick down against the white mocklife wall, and rewrote my first sentence.

### 3 Flight to Babylon

First I killed the diplomat.

Looking, no doubt, for my father, he had come unexpectedly upon me in the library of my father's home, and had seen what I was viewing. There was no way he could have mistaken the images visible on every curved wall of the hypertext chamber: words and graphix and video in multiple overlapping windows. And once he had seen what I was looking at, I had no choice but to stop him from telling anyone.

I don't think I meant to kill him. But as he stood there gaping at me, my mind just went blank with panic. My hand flailed wildly across the tabletop beside my stimucliner, and encountered something hard and thick as a bottle. I grabbed the object, jumped up, and struck.

The diplomat was lying on the floor, the side of head bloodily deformed to the shape of the statue I held. I looked curiously at the bronze for a full minute before I could recognize it as the likeness of Founder Moten, whose face I had seen daily since my cr chetime.

That was when I knew I had to run.

The spinning images all around me told me where to go.

I exited the HT chamber and began to run through the empty halls of the mansion. My father was away on Conservancy business, and had taken most of the resident human staff with him. I had given the rest of the bondies the day off, and powered down the usaforms. It was only at such times that I dared to view the highly illicit material the diplomat had caught me with. (And what I had gone through to get those info-caches I don't even want to say.)

Damn the intruder's dead nose ways! I thought as I jogged down carpeted and marbled corridors. Because of him I was being forced to give up the only life I had ever known.

But the next second I wondered if his intrusion hadn't been just the final push I was waiting for. After all, I had been dreaming of fleeing for so long...

Just as I reached the front hall, another stranger stepped from behind a hanging arras that depicted

scenes of Truehome's history. I stopped dead. What was this, for Moten's sake – open house?

The new guy was small and creepy, with a deadpan face.

"Go get the ambassador's chop," he ordered me.

My jaw hit my collarbone. "What? How did you –?"

"Forget all your questions, there's no time. Just do what I say."

There was noise and movement from behind the big tapestry. Stifled female laughter? I looked down to where the arras stopped an inch short of the floor, and saw –

Two sets of hooves? Yes, and a pair of hairy bare feet.

I looked back to the little guy. Something about him brooked no arguments. I made a frustrated, fearful noise halfway between a growl and a whimper, then turned around and jogged off.

The blood on the floor had already started to congeal. I reached down the diplomat's robefront and pulled out his chop. It was shaped like a red dragon couchant, suspended from a thin gold chain. (My own chop was in the form of an old pierced silver coin on a leather thong.) I snapped the chain and dropped the dragon chop in my pocket.

Back in the hall, I wasn't surprised to find the arras concealing nothing, all uninvited visitors having disappeared.

I was out the door and in a fifth-force floater. Then somehow I was at the spaceport.

When Customs asked to print my chop, I hesitated.

My chop contained, among a multitude of other data, my given name (Udo), my maternal family name (von Anglen), my solar-planetary-continental-genetic-pedigree designation (Cee-dee-four-seven-one-nine-zero-zero-three-eight-pip-emma-five-delta-blue-six-two-chibethsu bell), and my paternal family name (Sandyx). If I handed it over here, my trail would be obvious as piss in snow.

"Uh, I'd rather not –"

The Customs man shrugged. "Your choice. But in that case, you know, it's a one-way trip. They won't let you back in."

I knew. But I couldn't quite imagine yet what that meant.

When I passed through the gate, I suddenly felt burdens fall off me that I had never fully realized were there. I was shorn of Udo (given name that held my parents' expectations). I had discarded von Anglen (the weight of my maternal heritage). I had crawled out from under Ceedee... etcetera (the computer-encoded string that nailed me down into the Conservancy's rigid matrix). I promptly forgot Sandyx (that massive paternal debt) –

All I was left with was my nickname, Sandy. And that wasn't even on my chop.

The Heisenberg boat to Babylon was easy to find. All I had to look for was the most motley crowd of passengers.

I tried to pay with my chop, but the pilot refused it.

"Trip's free, boy. Courtesy of Babylon. Now hustle onboard, I've got a schedule to keep."

I ended up sitting next to the person who had been ahead of me. I guessed he was human, but he had been modified to look like a Truehome racoon, right down to



mask, whiskers, fur and tail.

It was the first time I had ever been so close to a moddie in real life. I had thought my secret viewing had gotten me used to the notion that such people existed, but I was wrong. I was scared and excited and tongue-tied, all at once.

"First time off-planet?" the moddie asked me.

I nodded.

"Don't sweat it. Remember what they say. 'If you're here, you're already everywhere.'"

I knew what my new acquaintance was getting at. Every point in this universe is the same – but unique. Location is a figment, a default value of matter that can be altered by the epistemological drive's concentration of quantum uncertainty along an object's Riemannian spatial dimensions. This is the discovery that underlies the universe we all inhabit.

But the human mind has some stubborn hard-wiring that resists this notion.

Instant transition can really scramble your head.

In less than 90 minutes, I went from hurrying through the familiar city of my birth (on good old Planetary Mass 5, under the Conservancy Designated sun 47190038) to spinning in orbit around a spectacular gas-giant, its gaudy face marbled like the endpapers in a real oldtime book.

Then, under conventional drive, the ship dropped into the methane-nitrogen atmosphere of one of the jovian's satellites, a moon half as big as Truehome itself. Down through a witches' brew of red-orange-yellow hydrocarbon polymers we dropped, coming to land on a plain of frozen methane.

"Everyone out for Babylon," said the pilot.

My seatmate had already deserted me. I looked around the interior of the ship. There were no recognizable suits, and the enbubbled city was at least a hundred metres away.

"How do we get there?" I asked.

The pilot twitched his ridged tail and nictated twice. He looked at me as if I were the dumbest innocent ever to spread himself across the spacetime continuum.

"Just take a quilt," said the pilot at last, and gestured. I turned.

My fellow passengers were donning organic mats that flowed together around them, sealing them away for their trip across the plain, and leaving them looking awfully like faceless people made of dough.

My stomach flipfopped, as the reflexes created by a lifetime of Conservancy antipathy to mocklife took over.

"Don't you have any, uh, mechanical suits?"

"No," said the pilot obstinately. "Now come on and leave. I've got a schedule to keep."

I tried to control my queasy nervousness. "But how will I even see?"

"You just TAP the quilt's sensory feed."

My expression must have betrayed my ignorance, because the pilot whistled.

"No TAP? How the hell do you expect to fit in? You damn anti-ems..." The pilot's invective trailed off into mutters as he got up and began to rummage in a white biopolymer ovoid that grew from the wall. Eventually he

emerged with a mechanical suit.

"If this still leaks like the last time someone used it, you'd better run."

So I ran.

It seemed like my destiny.

At the little blister attached to the huge dome, I entered through an ordinary hatch. Inside the pressurized lock I quickly doffed the treacherous suit. Then I turned toward the inner wall.

The entrance to Babylon was an organic sphincter. There were no controls visible to make it open.

This juxtaposition of mechanical and organic seemed – on the tenuous basis of my limited experience – to be a Commensality hallmark.

A telltale light near the outer door indicated that others were waiting to enter. I wondered what the hell to do now.

Hesitantly I stepped to the valve, laid a hand against its warm surface.

Seemingly responding to my liveness, the airlock sphinctered open.

I stepped into Babylon.

Hypertext hadn't readied me for the city at all.

Too much hit at once.

The first thing I noticed – if I can pretend to disassociate a single impression from the whole mass – was the sky. The curving dome far above was piebald: transparent strips alternated with luminescent ones, the latter providing *in toto* the equivalent of the daylight I was used to. These lightstrips were not so bright that I couldn't see the atmosphere beyond the dome, through the adjacent panels. It looked like one of Van Gogh's nightmares.

The next assault on my senses came from groundlevel.

The curving street I found myself in was full of people. Only they weren't.

People, that is. They were all alien sophonts, mixed with more moddies.

Although not one gave me more than a cursory glance, moving busily about on their own errands, their massed presence still creeped me out.

The aliens were giant mantis-like beings, and rubbery wet amphibian looking ones. Some resembled the hypothetical intelligent dinosaurs that might have emerged on an alternate Truehome timeline. Another species boasted a long snout out of which protruded a length of cartilage. This they slid in and out, producing a noise like a child's slidewhistle.

And the humans – if they didn't have tails, they had spinal armour. If they weren't over two metres tall, they might be under one. If they weren't painted in a dozen shades and styles, then they were bioluminescent. And if they didn't have extra appendages of one sort or another, then they were probably missing conventional ones. And they exhibited every fashion of dress from total nudity to layers of garments.

Someone pushed me from behind as I stood transfixed.

I whirled, ready to defend myself against Conservancy pursuers.

A man had tripped coming through the sphincter-lock, which I was inadvertently blocking. He recovered himself, gazed for a second or two at me, as if striving to com-



municate wordlessly somehow, then said aloud, "Sorry, commensal," before moving off.

I wanted to reply that I wasn't a commensal (whatever that implied), but the man was quickly gone, blending into the crowd.

Realizing I occupied a spot where such accidents were likely to keep happening, I decided to move on. Where, I didn't really know. My plans – formulated so hastily in the room where a dead man lay – didn't extend much beyond this moment.

One direction, therefore, being as good as another, I left the circumferential road and set off down a pedestrian-filled street that arrowed between buildings toward the interior of the dome.

After 15 minutes of aimless ogling (what was *that*, and how did *that* work, and what was *he* doing with *her*), something penetrated my awareness.

I was being followed.

By a woman.

Who as soon as I focused on her across the sea of strangers trotted quickly up, to halt right beside me.

## 4 Interruption Number Two

"Hey, it's about time you got to the good part!"

"Yeah, where we come in."

"It's been real boring up till now."

"That big expository lump about how strange everything looked."

"Don't you think you're laying on the naïveté a little thick?"

"You should have started with your arrival in Babylon."

"Yeah, nothing interesting ever happens anywhere else."

I tried to look disgusted. "For two people who never read anything until a few minutes ago, you're a real pair of critical experts."

"We know –"

"– a good story –"

"– in any medium."

"Well, just let me get on with it," I said. "I'll try to speed it up."

"You'd better."

"Or you'll lose your only audience."

## 5 Sisters Beyond the Skin

Dressed in little besides a thong-style bottom, the woman was taller than me, and I was not short. (I found myself confronting her staring breasts at eye-level, and forced myself to look up.) Her attractive face was painted in blue whorls. Although her skin was white as mine, she sported a massive kinky black corona of curls.

The woman shifted slightly as the flow of pedestrians surged by. (One or two took off into the air on fifth-force harnesses to avoid the static tableau we formed.)

From the slick ceramic surface of the street came a sharp clattering tattoo.

I looked down.

The woman was hooved.

At midcalf her skin smoothly segued into hairy horsy Clydesdale fetlocks, from beneath which peeped anoma-

lously caprine ivory hooves (with decorative gold insets?).

I couldn't find my voice.

The woman had no such problem.

"You're dressed funny," she announced. "What's your name?"

I looked at what I was wearing.

"Sandy," I said. "And what's so funny about a grey paper coverall with nuprene boots?"

"Well, Sandy," continued the woman, "it's got no colour or style. It's so drab."

I started to get angry. "Hey, now, wait just one minute –"

Ignoring me, the woman said, "And you've got no TAP. I've been trying to send to you for ten blocks now, and I couldn't get through."

"TAP, TAP," I spluttered. "I'm sick of hearing about TAPS! What the hell is a TAP?"

The woman assumed a knowing look. "I'll bet you're from the Conservancy."

"Oh, Jesus," I said, and turned away as if to leave.

"I've read about him," said the woman.

I faced her. "Who? Who are we talking about now?"

"Why, you brought him up."

I was getting a headache. Trying to order my thoughts, I realized the woman could be referring only to the object of my instinctive exclamation.

"Do you mean 'Jesus'?"

"Sure. I read the whole book about him. But he wasn't in the first half at all. I don't think the author planned too well, do you?"

I had to smirk. "Oh, I'm sure you read it. From start to finish."

The woman frowned. "You don't believe me. But if you don't know anything about TAPS, then I guess it's not your fault. Look, I'll quote something from it."

Wearing a blank look for a second, the woman paused.

Then she began to recite the entire *Book of Revelations*.

I stood dumbstruck. The woman continued to rattle off chapter and verse. At last I raised a hand.

"Whoa, hold it. Okay, okay, you read the book. I believe you."

"Don't stop me now. I haven't even gotten to the part yet about my namesake, Jezebel. You know, where John accuses Jezebel of all that immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols."

"That's your name?" I asked. "Jezebel?"

"Jezzie, mostly. I took it out of that very book. Now isn't it a coincidence, that you should mention a character from the same book when we first met?"

All I could do was shake my head.

"Where are you going?" asked Jezzie.

Sobering up after the manic conversation, I said, "I – I don't know."

"Are you hungry?" said Jezzie.

I considered. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"Great! We'll go to a refectory. Come on."

Jezzie began to clip-clop down the street.

I hurried to catch up.

From behind, I saw that Jezzie's body paint ran around from her face to the back of her neck and down her spine, ending in a red circle in the dimple above her buttocks.

When I was abreast of Jezzie (quite literally), I found I had a hundred questions.

"Why were you following me?" was first.

"Oh, I don't know. You looked different, I suppose. I was interested in you. And then there was the fact that you lacked a TAP. I was curious to see how you were going to manage."

"That damn word again! Will someone please explain it to me?" There had been no mention of the thing in all my secret reading. I wondered what it was, that it had been censored even from the illicit information. I had a sudden intuition. "Is that what allowed you to quote that text?"

Jezzie laughed. (It was somehow simultaneously charming and alarming.) "Of course. Did you think I actually had it memorized? What an old-fashioned idea. Is that how you do things in the Conservancy? A TAP – Tele-Adjunct and Psychoprosthetic, if you must – is so much better."

I thought a moment. Then: "What are you accessing?"

"Why, Babylon, of course."

"The city itself?"

Again the laugh. "In a way. But not the city you can see. The AOI beneath."

"The 'ayohwhy?'"

"No, the ay-oh-eye. Artificial Organic Intelligence. Don't tell me you don't have those either."

A host of childhood horror tales swarmed upon me then. Stories of how everyone in the Commensality was merely a puppet, their mental strings pulled by vast, domineering mocklife brains, hived away beneath the superstructure. I looked down at the syalon pavement, as if I could pierce its solidity and witness the calculating, nutrient-bathed mass beneath.

I felt a shiver finger my vertebrae, but tried to ignore it. Surely all these people – Jezzie included – could not be mindless automatons. The propaganda I had swallowed all my life must be wrong. Maybe further information would clarify things.

"How – how does it work?"

"Well, that's a big topic. Simply put, Babylon acts as a routing device for interpersonal communication, and as an auxiliary memory. Not to mention facilitating such things as machine-interfacing, remote-sensing, and so on."

"And can this Intelligence read all your thoughts?"

"Is that what's bothering you? I thought you were nervous about something. Of course not! What kind of arrangement would that be? Babylon only receives what I will to send, and vice-versa. That's just the way it was biofabbed."

For continued peace of mind, I chose to believe her. But Jezzie's next proposition tested the depth of this new faith.

"Are you that hungry? It'd only take a few minutes to fit you with a TAP – it's just a shot of nanodevices – and you'd get along much better. That is, if you're planning to spend much time in Babylon at all."

Faith was a thing only microns deep.

"Uh, I'm not sure. I mean, maybe not right now. If it's okay with you, that is."

Jezzie smiled, and we walked on in silence.

Eventually we came to a large building, into the door-

less portal of which all sorts of beings were entering.

"The refectory," announced Jezzie.

I watched a slippery amphibian creature stride in, then turned to Jezzie.

"I thought we were going for something to eat."

Jezzie looked puzzled. "We are. That's why we're here." She looked me up and down, and obviously TAPPED for something. "Did you want to eat – alone? Why, how strange! No, we don't do that here. What did you think 'Commensality' means? You just come with me. You'll enjoy it, you'll see."

Before I could assert myself, Jezzie had grabbed me strongly by the wrist and pulled me in –

Mist and steamy water billowed from dozens of showerheads at the far end of the tiled anteroom and humans and other sophonts, all naked, were washing themselves and each other and the noise of voices and falling water echoed off the hard walls and I pulled away and, confused, ran not outside but through an inner door which let out onto a balcony down from which stairs ran, and from which I could look down and away into a cavernous two-story room filled with troughs and tables and stalls and racks and cushions around/at/over/in which a horde of humans and nonhumans clambered/relaxed/groped and ate, and I let out a visceral noise midway between scream and grunt which went unnoticed amid the general prandial clamour and I turned blindly and fled back out and past the showers and into the streets and thrust past anyone who got in my way and ran and ran and ran.

When I was out of breath I stopped, panting, and collapsed.

I shut my eyes and tried to forget.

Ivory hooves on ceramic morsed a message to my ears. I looked.

"I give up, Jezzie," I said to the woman standing over me. "You can put that thing in my brain, but don't make me go back to that hellhole."

The woman smiled. "I'm not going to make you do anything. But I do have to tell you that you're surrendering to the wrong person."

"Huh?"

"I'm Judy," she said.

## 6 Doubletalk

I lived with Jezzie and Judy for a week before I realized, from various oddments of talk, that they were thieves.

Con artists. Sisters in scam. Pickbrains and cutcortexes.

Of course they didn't see themselves that way. They had a view of their own unconventional activities – which emerged in conversation over time – that glorified and justified what they did.

The act of conversation with the two women itself, however, was so distracting that it took me longer than it should have to piece together what they meant. If Jezzie's darting, elusive, unpredictably shifting solo talk had been analogous to the flight of a drunken hummingbird, then the verbal gymnastics of the two women together resembled an aerial ballet between two trapeze artists in a hall of mirrors.



Judy (who had taken her latest name from the Biblical Judith, she who had driven the nail through Holofernes's head) and Jezzie had developed a habit common among mates and partners in the Commensality. They conducted all their discussions via TAP when alone together. When a third person – me, say – was dealt into the game, the women simply mentally agreed to split their common thoughts in half, alternating sentences and fragments of sentences. Combined with the fact that my new roommates were totally identical to the eye and ear, this way of speaking nearly drove me crazy.

Lying on a thick cushioned biopolymer mat on the floor of one of the rooms of his new home, I now regarded the women who had somehow come unexplainably to adopt me. Judy and Jezzie were reclining unclothed on two organiform couches. (I had yet to overcome my repugnance to mocklife, hence the mat.) Biolites diffused a blue-green glow that seemed like the light in an under-sea coral hall. I was completely unable to tell which was the woman who had first approached me on the day of my arrival in Babylon, seemingly so far in the past.

We three had come to an impasse in our talk, and I was now considering how to circle around the topics I was interested in and sneak up on them from the rear.

"Let me get this straight," I began. "No one in the Commensality has to work."

"Right," said Jezzie or Judy.

"Because of unlimited power –"

"– from monopole furnaces –"

"– and intelligent management –"

"– of trade and resources –"

"– on the part of our AOI –"

"– all the necessities –"

"– are disbursed free –"

"– such as food and clothing –"

"– and shelter like this –"

"– you see."

My gaze had been ping-ponging back and forth between the two women while they spoke. Much as I had tried to suppress this reflex, I still found myself swiveling my attention between stereophonic interlocutors. Now I forced myself to concentrate my vision on a spot midway between the two and not move it.

"Okay. I can see that you could arrange a society that way, although it violates all the Conservancy's principles about encouraging self-discipline and hard work."

Judy or Jezzie sniggered, while the other reached down to scratch among the hairs at the interface between horse and human, her breasts shifting provocatively. (Many conversations had been sidetracked this way too. The women had lost little time in seducing me. I had, out of mingled loneliness, lust and fear of refusing these captors-cum-rescuers, complied eagerly. Despite the relationship rapidly falling into a curiously normal-feeling stability, I still found many aspects of it puzzling. Such as what had initially attracted the interest of the two women, and why they continued to be willing to foster me.)

Ignoring both the sarcastic noise and the pendulous flesh, I stuck to the intellectual plane.

"But you also maintain that Babylon keeps track of

everyone's credit rating, and that you can supplement it by work – or in your case, theft."

"You understand about the credit –"

"– but please don't call us thieves."

I shook my head. "I can't see why I shouldn't. You take things from other people that don't belong to you."

"Not physical things, really –"

"– just information –"

"– which is different –"

"– as you'd realize –"

"– if you knew anything at all –"

"– about information theory –"

"– which you really should –"

"– since the Commensality is based on information –"

"– as a source of wealth –"

"– although information has its limits, of course –"

"– because you can't eat it –"

"– or wear it –"

"– or screw it."

"Although sex of course –"

"– in its own unique way –"

"– is information transfer too."

"And let's not forget –"

"– that there's a limit –"

"– on the utility of information –"

"– when dealing with deterministic systems –"

"– that nevertheless exhibit inbuilt randomness –"

"– also known as chaos –"

"– which describes the Commensality –"

"– to a tee!"

I buried my face in my hands. I felt a headache blooming. Voice muffled, I said, "Tell me about it again."

"Information has to breed –"

"– copulate in a way –"

"– to produce new information –"

"– more valuable than the old."

"But people are jealous of the information they possess –"

"– although Commensality sensibilities minimize jealousy in all other areas –"

"– yet no society's perfect."

"But anyway –"

"– individuals are selfish –"

"– because they feel others will profit more than they will if they share –"

"– which is probably correct –"

"– because we certainly profit –"

"– from the information we garner –"

"– and recombine –"

"– and sell –"

"– to Babylon itself –"

"– and anyone else who offers a fair price."

"So we're definitely not thieves –"

"– even though we have to resort to trickery –"

"– and craft –"

"– and guile –"

"– and wiles –"

"– to get people to share –"

"– what isn't doing them any good anyway hoarded up."

"No, our role is vital –"

"– because we synthesize –"

“ – and synergize – ”  
 “ – collate – ”  
 “ – and collimate – ”  
 “ – anticipate – ”  
 “ – and aggregate – ”

“Enough, enough!” I shouted. “You’re not thieves. You’re wonderful, civic-minded, essential people. Absolute saints. Even though I don’t understand what you do.”

Judy and Jezzie were kneeling by my side before I realized they had moved. Their breasts bookended my attention.

“Poor boy – ”  
 “ – don’t worry – ”  
 “ – tomorrow we’ll show you what we do – ”  
 “ – and right now – ”  
 “ – just to soothe you – ”  
 “ – we’ll show you – ”  
 “ – we’re not saints – ”  
 “ – by any stretch – ”  
 “ – of your – ”  
 “ – imag – ”  
 “ – i – ”  
 “ – na – ”  
 “ – tion.”

Much later, lying back downward on my mat with two armfuls of warm Babylonian information-bawds, I said, “Those hooves are sharp.”

“We didn’t hear you complaining – ”  
 “ – at the time.”

“Well...” I figured I’d change the topic. “How come you like it so much when I touch that painted spot below your spine?”

“We thought you’d never ask.”  
 “It marks a biofabbed erotic patch – ”  
 “ – with more nerve-endings – ”  
 “ – than another spot – ”  
 “ – you usually go for.”

I was genuinely shocked. “That’s, that’s – ”  
 “Wonderful?”  
 “Exciting?”  
 “Hedonistic?”  
 “Libidinous?”

Realizing the hypocrisy of the condemnation I had been about to utter, after what I had just enjoyed, I refrained. Instead I slid both hands lower along parallel knobby spinal roadways.

“You mean all I have to do is this?”  
 “Oh – ”  
 “ – yes – ”  
 “ – just that – ”  
 “ – is fine!”

## 7 Interruption Number Three

The wall had absorbed the first half of what I had written, and my stick of charcoal was worn to a nub. I stopped to reach for a new one, and the Sisters jumped in.

“Well, the narrator is starting – ”  
 “ – to develop some character anyway.”  
 “Even if he is – ”

“ – pretty tedious.”  
 “But why don’t you get down – ”  
 “ – to the brass tacks?”  
 “Namely, how we work.”  
 “After all, it was our work – ”  
 “ – that got us into this mess with Babylon – ”  
 “ – where we know something so big – ”  
 “ – so stupendous – ”  
 “ – so monumental – ”  
 “ – that it could change the whole universe – ”  
 “ – and we can’t even make any credit off it!”  
 Making no reply – I should let these two think they could dictate even my memoirs? – I resumed writing.

## 8 Working the City

I ran a finger along the inner rim of a biopolymer tub; it came up coated with gravy and I licked it clean. I didn’t know what I had just eaten, but it had tasted great. Standing, I crossed the soft floor of the room the women had granted me as my own. The floor was warm and alive beneath my bare feet, but I was beginning not to mind mocklife so much. At least the nonsentient varieties. I still distrusted the purity and intelligibility of the motives of an enormous mass of paraneurons such as Babylon. Just thinking about being fitted with a TAP and entering into communication – however restrained and channelled by the user such an information flow might be – still gave me a queer, invaded feeling.

I came out into the room where Judy and Jezzie were waiting. The women were brushing out their pasterns and touching up their body swirls prior to setting out.

“Hey,” I said, “thanks for bringing back breakfast.” Still dabbing and currying each other, the women replied:

“You’re – ”  
 “ – welcome – ”  
 “ – even if it is – ”  
 “ – the biggest – ”  
 “ – most juvenile – ”  
 “ – stupidest – ”  
 “ – waste of time – ”  
 “ – we’ve ever participated in!”  
 “When are you going to accept – ”  
 “ – that if you want to live here – ”  
 “ – you have to behave – ”  
 “ – in certain matters – ”  
 “ – like everyone else?”  
 “Yeah!”  
 “Right!”  
 “And what’s so distasteful – ”  
 “ – about the refectories – ”  
 “ – anyway?”

I glared at the two primping women. “Don’t rush me. I’m trying my best, you know. Look.” I lifted an unbooted foot and wiggled my toes. “I don’t even mind walking around on this living floor any more, do I? And I sleep on an organiform couch just like you. So I am changing. But these other things – ” I shook my head. “I can’t just toss myself into that, that food-orgy, like someone who was born here. And as for letting someone pump my brain full of nanodevices – no way.”



Jezzie and Judy seemed to relent somewhat. Their moods were changeable as the coloured patterns in the poisonous atmosphere beyond the dome, and I suspected that they were incapable of being angry at me for long, no matter what I did – or failed to do.

But sometimes I wondered if their quicksilver personalities also insured that their loyalty and interest in me were equally fluid.

“I suppose we should be glad – ”

“ – that in just a couple of weeks – ”

“ – you’ve gone from completely anti-em – ”

“ – to only two-thirds.”

I thought about it. Mocklife, modifications (to the “human norm,” that was), and miscegenation: the triple bugaboos of Conservancy thinking. I supposed I had loosened up a bit with regards to the first, and the second seemed within the bounds of possibility. But as for the third –

Unwilling even to think about it, I said, “Let’s go. I’m anxious to see you two at work.”

Several days had passed since the women had promised to show me how they operated as catalyst in the exchange and exfoliation of information. They had kept putting me off, however, saying that the timing wasn’t just right yet.

This morning, though, they had announced that certain mysterious conditions – things they could only “feel” – were now propitious.

“All right,” said Judy.

“But first – ” added Jezzie.

“ – we have to get you decorated.”

“You’re too conspicuous – ”

“ – as you are.”

Before I could react, the Sisters had grabbed a pressurized bottle and begun to spray me from head to foot (I wore only shorts by now, my coverall having disintegrated under use.)

It was body paint, and it came out tartan plaid.

“How the – ?” I began.

“Oh, Sandy, you dope.”

“It’s nanopaint – ”

“ – and assembles itself.”

“Why the Conservancy bans this tek – ”

“ – we’ll never know.”

“Just ‘cause a planet or two – ”

“ – went grey goo – ”

“ – before they perfected it – ”

“ – we suppose.”

So, Judy and Jezzie having gotten every hair on heads and shanks into place, and me looking like a Truehome kilt, out we went, into the teeming streets of the capsuled city.

Babylon was shaped like a fat, blobby U that sprawled over many square kilometres. Enclosed by its arms was an inlet of the deep liquid methane ocean, whose tides – generated by the jovian hidden above – often lapped right against the dome. Jezzie and Judy lived a bit away from the city’s centre, along the bend of the U. Today, they set out down one of the arms.

I trotted behind my escorts, hanging back to marvel at the sights. The mix of sophonts still bewildered me, and I was constantly trying to make sense of the various

ways in which the humans and nonhumans related.

As I still did from time to time, I looked around me for signs of minions of the Conservancy, come to haul me back to the cramped and constricted life I seldom thought about now. Even this reflex was dying in me. Reaching up to the two chops hung about my neck – coin and dragon – I fingered the last two tokens of my old life, and thought once more about discarding them. But it was so inbred in me never to let my chop out of my possession, that I still hesitated. As for the ambassador’s device, I retained it more as a reminder of my guilt than of my liberty.

Ahead, the doubled hoofbeats of my guides on the syalon pavement sounded like a giant’s four fingernails drummed regularly on a china plate.

We passed a null-gee natatorium, and I wished they would stop for a swim. Denied the communal showers in the refectories, I was forced to employ the natatoriums to freshen up. At least there one could swim unmolested, wearing a minimally decent outfit, and not worry about some scaled stegasoid offering to scrub one’s back.

A springboard compressed beneath the weight of a man, then shot him upward, into the free-floating globe of water, where he cavorted with the other swimmers, all of whom wore the temporary gills that allowed them to utilize the hyper-oxygenated fluid. A few drops from the man’s entry-point escaped the shaping and supporting fifth-force field and splattered the pavement below.

Watching the sporting swimmers, I bumped into the backs of the halted women.

Recovering, I saw that they had stopped to converse in low tones with a big smiling black man wearing a leather harness and little else. Before I even quite realized a conversation was going on, the man was saying, “So long, Sisters. Catch you later.”

Then he was gone, and we were walking again. Now more interested in the doings of the women than the sights around me, I began to match my pace to theirs, both of them on one side, my left, the better to talk with them.

“Who was that?” I asked for openers.

“Meat – ”

“ – a real thief – ”

“ – the kind that relieves you of material possessions – ”

“ – but a good friend – ”

“ – who if you hadn’t been with us – ”

“ – and you hadn’t been so obviously bankrupt – ”

“ – would have stolen your rear molars – ”

“ – before you knew it.”

“Meat – that’s his real name?”

One of the women – Judy? Jezzie? – shrugged and, surprisingly, replied solo.

“It’s what he goes by. Most people in the Commensality choose and alter their names whenever they feel like it. It’s part of our notions about freedom.”

I thought about the burdensome nomenclature I had discarded when I fled the dead man lying in the HT room in my father’s mansion. Was the easy dismissal of my heritage one more sign that I was Commensality-inclined? But what about all the other confusing things I felt? Was I one thing only, or two, or many? It seemed impossible to decide.

So I said, "Are you two really sisters?"

"No –"

"– not by birth."

"Are you" – I hesitated – "like, uh, clones?"

The sisters laughed, a duet that trilled back and forth.

"Why would the Commensality –"

"– bother with clones –"

"– when what we cherish –"

"– is diversity?"

"No, our genes –"

"– are heterogenous –"

"– as are our psyches –"

"– and it's only our facades –"

"– that are deliberately modified –"

"– to symbolize a tenet –"

"– of information theory –"

"– and perhaps to confuse –"

"– and thereby facilitate –"

"– our schemes."

"So we are sisters only –"

"– by inclination –"

"– and mutual temperament."

I pondered this paradox. "You got yourself altered because of some stupid theorem?"

"It's not a 'stupid theorem.'"

"It's the basis for what we do."

"When we told you earlier –"

"– that information has to breed –"

"– we didn't mention that the birth of new information –"

"– usually involves –"

"– the destruction of old information."

"For instance –"

"– take two plus two –"

"– equals four."

"The expression 'two plus two –"

"– is information –"

"– and so is 'four.'"

"But if we just told you 'four –"

"– you couldn't deduce whether it came –"

"– from 'three plus one –"

"– or 'two plus two.'"

"The destruction of information happens –"

"– whenever two previously distinct facts or situations –"

"– become indistinguishable –"

"– subsumed in the new creation."

"Witness us –"

"– two distinct beings –"

"– now indistinguishable –"

"– one new fact."

I had gotten lost somewhere in the bilateral barrage. The sisters seemed to sense this, and abandoned their fusillade for a single-pronged attack.

"We know it's rather hard to comprehend, if you're not used to the concepts," said Judy or Jezz. "But just watch what we do today, and maybe it'll make more sense."

I nodded acquiescence. We walked on further in silence, until I broke it.

"How come you didn't say what you wanted to say to Meat by TAP, instead of whispers?"

"Well, it's like this. Babylon is the intermediary in all

communication via the TAP. Now, Babylon has certain responsibilities and duties, all governed by its basic bio-fabbed inhibitions relating to the freedom of us, its charges. One of Babylon's duties is to protect the Commensality, this outpost in particular. Any behaviour that threatens our common stability – and such behaviour is pretty rare, simply because there's not much an individual can do to undermine what amounts to practical anarchy – is frowned upon by Babylon. And so it tries to stop such things. Meat, I'm sorry to say, frequently indulges in certain practices, such as egregious theft, which Babylon finds contraproductive. So we don't discuss such things mentally. What we retain within our own skulls can't get to Babylon. And what Babylon doesn't know can't hurt us."

I sensed that the sister speaking had left something unsaid. Thinking of all the remote manipulators – mek and organic – Babylon operated, I asked, "What happens to those troublemakers Babylon catches?"

For a few seconds, the Sisters said nothing. Then, as if seeking refuge in mutuality again, they reverted to antiphonal response.

"They're cored –"

"– their higher brain centres removed –"

"– leaving just the stem –"

"– and a mass of paraneurons substituted –"

"– which puts Babylon in direct control –"

"– of the body –"

"– giving him another agent –"

"– to implement –"

"– his policies –"

"– for our own good."

"So if you ever spot –"

"– an individual –"

"– with no expression –"

"– deadfaces –"

"– you're confronting Babylon –"

"– itself."

I looked nervously around. Everything appeared different. A dimness or veil seemed to have occluded my sight. I thought it was a reaction to this new knowledge. Then I realized we had passed into Shadow. Looking up, I saw the floating mass of the Hanging Gardens, making its leisurely way over the rooftops and under the lights. I pressed closer to the women on my left, until I was almost in their nonexistent pockets, causing them to say:

"Hey –"

"– what do you –"

"– think we all are?"

"Siamese –"

"– triplets?"

Some few meandering metres on, one of the Sisters chose to disappear. At the door of a building they told me was a "sensorium," Judy – or Jezz – went inside, leaving the other woman to wait in the street with me.

I was growing more and more curious about what was to happen, and so tried to pump my companion for more details, all the while tracking with half an eye the comings and goings of the various variegated and variform vessels of sentience who vanished through the doorless arch into the sensorium.



"Exactly who are you looking for?" I asked.

(A two-metre tall mantis, arms held prayerfully, saliva iridescenting its mandibles, passed by us, and into the building.)

"Anyone who's just made the transition in from a world called Doradus," said Judy (or Jezzie).

"And how do you know that anyone has even come from there lately?"

"By checking with Babylon. One of the Commensality's principles, you see, is absolutely unimpeded access to public information. Anything that's not private knowledge – the results of someone's unique life-experiences – is available to whoever requests it. That's simultaneously one of the hallmarks and one of the causes of equality among individuals. Well, part of the public dataflow is arrivals and departures of sophonts into and out of Babylon. So just by TAPPING, we can learn if any individuals fulfilling our specs are here."

I considered this, suddenly wondering if the Sisters had learned of my arrival in the same way, and been waiting for me, for reasons I was as yet unable to fathom. Or was that being too paranoid? And exactly what degree of paranoia was too much?

Dismissing this issue, I said, "Okay. So you're interested in this world – Doradus? – for whatever reason. Why don't you just go there? Isn't that what our age is all about? Just picking up and taking off, when the urge strikes you?"

(A rubbery-faced neotenic newt-like biped sidled by, and tried to brush against me; I yanked away with quivering repugnance.)

"If we were interested in that world *qua* world, then sure, we'd go. But we're not. We just want to make a profit off it. And for that, all we need is accurate information about it. Now, the handy thing about information – in these days of hot heels and itchy feet – is that nine times out of ten, it'll come to you. Have you ever heard it said that the aggregate movements of individuals in our era resemble Brownian motion? Well, using that model, you realize that all particles – or people – eventually interact, and that a random, or even null, motion is as good as a planned course."

Trying to recall if I had ever heard my father speak of Doradus before, and why it might be so important, I asked, "What sector is this world in?"

Judy laughed. "How the hell should I know? All I have are its relativistic coordinates."

I grew a bit irked at Judy's careless quashing of my question. I was willing to compromise on a lot of things, but to others – maybe not even objectively the most important – I still held fast.

"I can't get over how you Commensality types refuse to assign a world to its proper stellar sector. At home, all I ever heard was talk about spheres of influence and contention, and how important it was to know where worlds were in relation to each other. Don't you have any holistic view of the universe?"

"And I can never comprehend why you Conservancy fossils still think imaginary lines in space are so important. You're so concerned with the galaxies that you can't

see the stars, let alone the gigatrillions of sentients who flourish – despite your best efforts to deny them freedom – beneath those myriad suns."

I was about to reply hotly – whose freedom had I ever stifled, except perhaps my own? – when Jezzie came out.

She was accompanied by a woman much shorter than herself, whose skin was maculated rather like that of a Truehome giraffe: brick-coloured irregular splotches on a clay-coloured background.

Jezzie, guiding the stranger with a long arm around her waist, turned away from Judy and me. I was about to hail the returned sister when Judy clamped a hand over his mouth.

"If you had gotten a TAP when we asked you to, you'd know Jezzie doesn't want us to join her yet. We're supposed to follow at a distance."

Released, I lamely said, "Oh."

"Come on, then." Judy set off.

I followed, casting a last backward glance at the sensorium, wondering (but really knowing) what had transpired inside between Jezzie and the woman she now ambled hip-to-waist with down the crowded street. But did that mean that all those, those creatures –

(A sinuous feline sophont flicked his tail in my face, tickling my nose and making me jerk back.)

Judy was getting too far ahead, and I hurried to catch up.

For half an hour we followed the pair through the city. Eventually I said:

"Hey, how come you two never fly, and save on the leg-work?"

"It discourages the close contact and mixing we need for our work. Did you ever try to strike up a casual verbal conversation in midair?"

I couldn't say that I ever had, the Conservancy not being too keen on unvehicled flight, as expressive of a kind of suspect abandon.

At last Jezzie and her companion came to a broad open paved plaza set among towers. They joined a queue. Judy and I held back, around a corner.

"Airbus stop for the Gardens," explained Judy. "For those like us, who don't care to fly unenclosed."

A bus set down, and the members of the queue filed forward.

"Now Jezzie's telling her she'd prefer to wait for the next bus, so they can be alone."

I didn't ask why.

A second bus came a minute later, before the two-person queue had acquired any new members.

Jezzie and her friend moved to board.

Judy urged, "Now! Run!"

She tugged me along with her.

We clip-clopped and foot-slapped across the plaza and tumbled into the bus just as its gullwing door shut and the craft lifted off.

I got a confused glimpse of the interior of the mek-piloted bus: white curved cushioned walls and overhead handholds, no seats. Then I focused on the three women.

Judy (or Jezzie) had the giraffe-patterned woman pinioned. The captive had time to say, "Hey! What's going on?" before the other Sister lowered her head toward the

woman's chest.

What the Christ?, I thought. Was this some bizarre kind of rape?

As the Sisterly crown of frizzy black curls came level with the captive's neck, something stirred beneath the hair. I watched in utter amazement as what seemed to be a thin tendril whipped out and fastened itself for a moment on the third woman's neck before retreating beneath Jezzie's hair.

The bitten woman stiffened, eyes rolling up, then relaxed. Judy let her collapse gently to the floor. Jezzie bent over the victim and checked her pulse. After a few seconds, she seemed satisfied with the results of her attack. She spoke to the woman on the floor.

"You are one of the directors of the nuprene industry on Doradus. Is it true that you have a secret plan to switch to biopolymers?"

"Yes," said the woman in a drugged voice.

"You will forget the events of the last hour in their entirety," Jezzie commanded, apparently finished with her questioning.

The airbus docked with a bump at the Hanging Gardens. The whole trip of less than a minute was over.

The Sisters, effortlessly supporting the unconscious woman between them, exited; I followed. They dumped her unceremoniously behind a potted bush, and took the next bus down.

On the ground, I could contain myself no longer. I wanted to know what Jezzie had concealed in her hair, but more importantly, I couldn't figure out the desirability of what they had learned.

"You went to all that trouble and risk just to ask a question about the frigging plastics industry on some world halfway to nowhere?"

"That's -"

"- right."

"And we're not -"

"- done yet."

In the next three hours Judy and Jezzie pulled the same scam, *mutatis mutandis*, four more times, all on returned visitors from, or citizens of, Doradus, learning:

That one individual planned to market solo flight harnesses;

That hardly anyone followed the pronouncements of a certain syndicated commentator on interstellar affairs any more;

That a group of extremists was campaigning for strict genetic mapping as a prerequisite for enfranchisement;

And that simple bodymods - nothing more radical than the giraffe woman's skin - were quite respectable.

After picking this last datum out of a man's mind, the Sisters retreated to a bench with a view of the Bay. While methane waves licked the dome wall, and a methane rain gently fell, they consulted, with me listening in amazement.

"If we add the switch -"

"- to biopoly and harnesses -"

"- to the disbelief in -"

"- that grey eminence, whatsizname -"

"- and don't forget to include -"

"- the acceptance of mods -"

"- but we have to subtract -"

"- because of those extremists -"

"- then the secret's just as plain -"

"- as the sun in the sky -"

"- except of course -"

"- that you can't see -"

"- the sun from Babylon -"

"- unless you can penetrate the fog!"

I was beside myself. (Or could only the Sisters claim that?) "What is it? What's so obvious? Come on, tell me."

Jezzie and Judy seemed to be enjoying my confusion. Or perhaps they were only thrilled by what they had learned. They watched me struggle to decipher what they meant for a few seconds, then gave in to my importuning.

"Well, first you have to know -"

"- that Doradus is a neutral world -"

"- courted alike -"

"- by Conservancy and Commensality -"

"- and what we've discovered -"

"- by adding two plus two -"

"- to get four -"

"- is that with just a little push -"

"- Doradus is ready -"

"- to join the Commensality!"

I considered. I seemed to remember now some mention in the past by my father of this world. If what the Sisters said was true, he could see the value of this information.

I whistled. "Then you can sell this to -"

"- Babylon himself -"

"- who while you were slowly starting to understand -"

"- we already TAPPED -"

"- and who agreed to credit -"

"- our joint account -"

"- by a sum so big -"

"- that your eyes would pop -"

"- if we told you -"

"- and moreover -"

"- Babylon has already dispatched -"

"- messages to his fellow AOI's -"

"- who will now concentrate their efforts -"

"- to capture Doradus -"

"- for the side of the good guys."

I was stunned. "I'll be damned." There was nothing else I could say about what the Sisters had accomplished. Then I remembered my curiosity about the sisters' secret weapon, which I had confusedly witnessed in action five times.

"What did you use to knock out all those people?"

Lowering her head, one of the women reached up to part her thick nest of curls. I looked down, not really knowing what I expected to see.

Coiled flat up against her scalp were four inches of a snake thin as my little finger, whose rear portion fused imperceptibly into the woman's skin.

The snake hissed, tongue darting.

I started back, recalling the intimate times when I had sought to run my fingers through the Sisters' fuzzy polls and they had subtly pulled away.

"Just -"

"- call -"

"- us -"



“ – Medusae.”

Pulse pounding, I eyed them queerly. “Whatever you say, ladies. Whatever you say.”

## 9 Instant Experts

“We’re so glad – ”

“ – to see you unbending – ”

“ – at least a little.”

The Sisters and I sat in the Commensal room in our new living quarters. (Thanks to the profits from the Doradus information, they had been able to satisfy a long-standing dream of renting a suite in the single, high-status building that graced the Hanging Gardens with its faerie presence.)

The three of us were eating a meal together.

That simple statement astonished me almost more than anything else I had done or seen in Babylon.

Simply put, I had never done such a thing in the company of others before.

I guessed I was really changing, fitting into the Commensality. (Although thoughts of plunging into the refectory, which the Sisters still advocated, continued to fill me with horror. Mingling/feeding with clawed and furred and tailed nonhumans – it didn’t even bear contemplation.)

Each day, it seemed, brought a new revelation about myself.

“Well, I’m glad too,” I replied after swallowing. “I never would have done anything like this back home. Oh, sure, some people did. But they were the lower classes. Because of my father’s status, I never could.”

“Now all you need – ”

“ – to feel at home here – ”

“ – is a TAP.”

I gave a negative shake of my head. “No, I’ll get along all right without one. After all, they’re just a gimmick. Basically, I can do all the really important things you two do.”

One of the Sisters sipped at a drink, and the other said, “Oh, really?” Apropos of nothing, she added, “What was that designation of your homeworld?”

I reeled off the immutable Conservancy figures. “Why do you ask?”

The women had switched roles, she who had sipped now speaking. “No reason. Say, why don’t you tell us a little more about your home. You never really have.”

“Uh, okay, I guess.” I settled back on my warm couch. “It’s not a very special world, I suppose, except insofar as every world is. Just three continents – ”

“Are you counting – ”

“ – Thone Island – ”

“ – which after all – ”

“ – is pretty damn big?”

I pretended not to notice their interruption, realizing now how they intended to goad me. “The population is small, but we were only recently discovered – ”

“Three million, four hundred thousand, six hundred and seventy-nine – ”

“ – as of yesterday at noon – ”

“ – not counting bonded criminals – ”

“ – and it was discovered 50 years ago – ”

“ – by someone named – ”

“ – Jared Moten.”

“I lived in Truehome City,” I persevered, “and my father was – ”

“ – Conservator Sandyx – ”

“ – whose duties included – ”

“ – the management of worlds – ”

“ – four-seven-one-nine-zero-zero-three-eight – ”

“ – through 64.”

“And your brothers were named – ”

“ – Rolf and Heinrich – ”

“Stop it! Okay, so you can think rings around me with a TAP, and I’m just a stupid puritan for not getting one. But the fact remains that my skull contains stuff you can never know unless I tell you, and if you’re interested, you’ll shut up and listen.”

“Sorry – ”

“ – Sandy.”

Mollified, I tried to relax. “Okay, no hard feelings.” I brought my cup to my lips, drank, and said, “Commensals, right?”

“Commensals – ”

“ – indeed.”

“Well, to continue. My life, because of my father’s stature in the Conservancy, was regulated to the last detail. There was hardly anything I could do or even think for myself. I didn’t mind it so much when I was a kid, but these last few years, it really got to me. I guess I was just ready to explode when – ”

“Yes?”

“You can tell us, Sandy.”

It all flooded back over me then, the emotions strong as when new, but I somehow managed to get it out.

“I was attended by a dozen bond-servants all the time. You completely core your worst criminals, but we just fit ours with mechanical overrides. It’s the only kind of brain-modification the Conservancy permits. And wipe that argumentative look off your faces, ’cause I’m not about to be enticed into debating which treatment is more humane. Anyway, one or two were always by my side, more to keep an eye on me, I knew, than to really obey. Well, one day I managed to get alone for a few minutes. I went into our hypertext chamber and inserted an info-cache. That cache had been smuggled from offworld and cost me a month’s allowance. It was all about Babylon.

“I never got to view it. This stranger arrived – a diplomat, I assume.” I hefted the dragon-chop. “This is his. He walked in on me and saw what I was viewing. It burst on me that if he reported it to my father I was in deep trouble. Before I knew it, my hand fell on a brass statue of Founder Moten. I picked it up and, and – ”

I flashed then on a detail that had escaped me till now: blood had covered the head of the statue in cruel mimicry of the blood on the diplomat’s skull.

But the statue’s skull, unlike the stranger’s, was still intact.

For some reason that crummy little detail set me off. I tried to hold back sobs I could have sworn I’d used up as I ran from my father’s mansion and to the spaceport.

“Don’t worry,” said a Sister softly.

“You’re here now.”

But I still wasn't quite sure that being here was reason enough to feel good.

## 10 Interruption Number Four

The Sisters, growing tired of sitting still for the length of my narrative, were up and stretching in a series of exercises I recognized as kind of modified Truehome tai-chi while I rested my cramped fingers. Their movements failed to stem a flow of sarcastic comments.

"How touching."

"Cradled to our matronly bosoms."

"Maybe we should formally adopt you."

"Listen –"

"– finish this up."

"Don't string us along –"

"– much longer."

"There's a whole city out there –"

"– just waiting to be plucked."

"Who's the author here?" I asked. "Me or you?"

The Sisters froze.

"This city –"

"– has only one –"

"– real author –"

"– and that's –"

"– Babylon."

## 11 Meeting with a Stoat

Soon came a time – both welcome and dreaded, happy and sad – when Babylon no longer looked so exotic to me, but instead merely seemed like the place where I lived. True, occasional actions and words – from the Sisters and others – still had the capacity to shock me, making me wonder if I really understood anything about Babylon and the Commensality at all. But on the whole, I felt integrated into the city hidden in the depths of the frigid sherbet-banded atmosphere.

So despite my continued adamant refusal to participate in the rituals enacted in refectory or sensorium, I prided myself on fitting in.

Staying clothed and fed in Babylon was no trouble, of course. Food the Sisters brought back with them from their trips to the refectories, sometimes sharing a meal with me, other times declining, having already eaten. When I needed new shorts, I just took them from the clothing distributories. My feet remained bare.

I was even coming closer and closer every day to getting a TAP.

Or so I told myself.

As for enjoying the luxuries Babylon offered, I relied on the generosity of Judy and Jezzie. They were always flush, and seemed quite willing to support me. I had given up trying to figure out why, and only at rare intervals did I suffer from paranoid fantasies about some devious, long-term scheme into which I meshed like a gear fashioned by the Sisters' cunning hands.

I chose to believe I contributed something to the Sisters' pleasure too, and that made me feel good.

I accompanied them on all their information-gathering exploits, and was always highly appreciative of their prowess.

When the Sisters picked up a bad case of hoof-rot (from the showers in the refectory, they claimed), I went with them to the infirmary and offered emotional support while the iatro-mek poked and daubed and epidermally perfused a variety of antibiotics.

And of course I tried to keep Jezzie and Judy sexually happy too. Because they sure met my needs. The things they knew – well, it just boggled the mind. My previous experiences had been confined to the rather uninspired performances of female bond-servants, whose lack of initiative was highly discouraging.

No such problem existed with the Sisters.

If anything, they were a tad too imaginative at times.

"Just move –"

"– like so –"

"– and let us –"

"– do this –"

"– while you –"

"– touch here –"

"– and here."

"Oh!"

"Oh!"

"Oh! I echoed.

And when you threw in early morning gambols in the natatoriums, why, everything seemed to be going just swimmingly.

Until the Sisters suddenly announced that a rival held something they wanted.

The three of us were walking through the streets of the city one day, when they brought it up.

"You know, of course –"

"– we're not the only ones –"

"– who do what we do."

I thought about it until I had convinced myself that I had really previously considered such a possibility.

"Sure," I said. "That only makes sense."

"Well, we've recently learned –"

"– that one of our peers –"

"– a little guy named Stoat –"

"– who looks like his namesake –"

"– and is just as mean –"

"– has uncovered some juicy information –"

"– that fits with a piece we've got –"

"– and we want it."

"Now, even with his piece and ours –"

"– the fabulous puzzle will still be incomplete –"

"– but at least we'll be one step closer."

"But here's the catch."

"We need your help –"

"– right now."

I said, "Me? Help you? Now? How could I? And with something so valuable. Is it worth more than, say, that Doradus information?"

"So much more –"

"– you wouldn't believe it."

I whistled. "What is it?"

"Partial relativistic co-ordinates –"

"– for a piece of string."

I waited for the punchline. When it didn't come, I said, "String?"

"What century –"

"– are you living in?"

"Look, you know –"

"– about monopolies?"

"Yeah, they're what Babylon gets its power from. Little pieces of the primordial universe, left over from the Big Bang."

"Very good. Then you'll understand –"

"– if we tell you –"

"– that cosmic string –"

"– is a larger, continuous portion –"

"– of the same Ur-stuff."

"A massive tube of spacetime –"

"– the six Planckian dimensions that are normally hidden in every particle –"

"– unrolled and revealed –"

"– in the form of a closed loop –"

"– a topological defect in our universe –"

"– where the basic symmetry –"

"– of the Monobloc prevails."

"And people will kill to discover –"

"– the location of such a remnant –"

"– although Jehovah only knows –"

"– what they'll do with it –"

"– since unlike a monopole –"

"– it's too massive to move –"

"– but want it they do –"

"– and we intend to be the ones –"

"– to sell it to the highest bidder."

"Why," I asked, "can't you just deduce the information the same way this guy Stoa did?"

One Sister alone chose to speak now, as if the two were growing tired of giving such a prolonged explanation, and wished I would just take what they said on faith.

"The components of his synthesis have dispersed, are no longer in Babylon. And there's no time to track them down, since Stoa, we've learned, is planning to depart Babylon today. What he did, if you're really interested, is to capitalize on a salient feature of string: its gravity. Your average piece of cosmic string holds approximately ten-to-the-15th solar masses. This concentration has the effect of acting as a gravitational lens, doubling the image of stars and galaxies behind it, all along its length. What Stoa did was to correlate many such sightings, thereby fixing the approximate location of the string."

"Why's he leaving?" I persisted.

"He's found a buyer offplanet, and is bringing the information directly to him."

"And why don't you just grab him and drug him and get the coordinates from him, like you usually do?"

"Jesus –"

"– can you believe –"

"– a game of 20 questions –"

"– when time is slipping away!"

"Listen, it's like this. Stoa doesn't consciously know the coordinates. What he did as a safeguard against just such an attack was to store them in Babylon – who is prevented from accessing them without the owner's permission, by the way – and then had them blanked from his own brain. So assaulting him prior to today would

have gotten us nowhere. But now he's chosen to leave, and you know what that means."

"I do?"

"Whenever a Commensality citizen departs, presumably for another spot in our federation, he gets to withdraw all his private information out of his old AOI and take it with him, in the form of a mass of paraneurons in a little homeostatic container, which, at his destination, will be merged with the resident AOI, to become accessible once more. Stoa is carrying his container right now, and heading for the port."

I felt overwhelmed by this sudden flood of facts. "And my part would be – what?"

"Stoa's tough, and it's going to require both of us to take him. While we keep him busy, you grab his container and run."

I considered. How could I refuse?

"Okay," I finally agreed.

"Good –"

"– because there –"

"– he is."

I looked, saw a little thin man with a ruff of bristly fur running like a mohawk from the crest of his skull down his back to his buttocks. He moved hurriedly, cradling something in his arms, casting ferret-like glances from side to side.

"We're going to flank him. You stay off to one side till you see an opening."

I peeled away from the Sisters, who trotted up noisily behind Stoa. A few metres away, the women began to argue.

"You Appaloosa bitch!"

"You Palomino slut!"

"If you didn't look –"

"– just like me –"

"– I'd tell you –"

"– how grotesque you are!"

Stoa stopped. He opened his mouth to reveal a set of needle-teeth.

"Watch it, Sisters. Get out of my way."

"You keep out –"

"– of our argument."

"This is personal."

"Yeah!"

The Sisters were blocking Stoa's progress. He seemed uncertain of how to react. They began to feint at each other, long arms waving in a faux boxing match. Bystanders scattered.

Stoa moved to detour.

One of the women launched a high kick, seemingly for her Sister's jaw.

In mid-motion she pivoted and her hoof headed for Stoa's gut.

The little man, still holding the silver egg that bore his memories, sprang like a weasel for the throat of the attacking Sister. She got her arm up barely in time for Stoa's teeth to fasten on it instead of her jugular.

The other Sister closed in. Still fastened to one yowling Sister's forearm, Stoa brought up a hand tipped with wicked claws and raked at the other woman.



The whole escapade had taken seconds, and left me dazed. When I saw Stoa's arm come up, I realized that left only one arm to hold the egg.

Bending low to avoid flailing limbs, I rushed in, wrested the egg from Stoa –

– and ran.

Half an hour later, I was in a part of the city I didn't know.

No one seemed to be after me.

When I had caught my breath, I oriented myself by certain predictable patterns in the sky, and headed home.

Jezzie and Judy were already there. They fell excitedly on me.

"What a tussle –"

"– with that little mink."

"But when he wakes up –"

"– he's not going to even remember –"

"– how he got snookered."

"My arm's still sore –"

"– and so's my face –"

"– but we don't think –"

"– the new skin will tear –"

"– if we celebrate!"

With that, they toppled me backward onto a couch, the precious egg dropping safely to the soft floor, and proceeded to have their way with me.

Which turned out to be just the treatment I needed for the jitters I hadn't even been aware I had.

Falling asleep in our warm pile, the Sisters began to muse lazily.

"If only we had –"

"– a few more sightings –"

"– we'd probably be able to pinpoint –"

"– that damn string."

"I feel like the necessary information is so close."

"Me too. It's our trustworthy –"

"– but imperfect –"

"– info-witches' intuition."

I rubbed my eyes sleepily. "What can we do?"

"Only one thing left," said Judy.

"A visit to the priestess –"

"– of Babylon –"

"– even though it'll wipe our credit balance –"

"– flatter than a worm on a neutron star."

"Oh, good," I mumbled, and fell asleep before I could even think to say:

Priestess?

## 12 Temple of Bel

Eight tapering towers piled high atop each other, wrapped with a ramp around and around, the whole situated in the exact centre of the city: that was the priestess's home. Striding up the corkscrew approach, I made the Sisters fill me in, solo style.

"The priestess," said Judy, "is a willing extension of Babylon. Not cored, she has agreed to maintain a constant, high-density transmission and realtime contact with our AOI, functioning as a unique input device. All her senses have been modified to a high degree, and she's gotten a host of new ones. For instance, she'll be naked to allow her

lateral-lines – piscine – and infra-pits – viperine – full play. We'll tell her our situation, and she'll correlate it with all Babylon knows, while simultaneously picking up subliminal stuff we can't even register, right down to the quantum level. Then she'll give us her advice or prophecy."

"It's a very demanding job," said Jezzie, "and no one can do it too long. They say you're changed for life afterwards, even when Babylon gives up his contact. But it's a sinecure for the rest of your days. We've thought of volunteering when we get too old for this racket. In a hundred years or so."

I nodded as if I understood.

At last we reached the top level of the layer-cake temple. There was a single square doorless arch. We went inside.

I had expected a dark, incense-filled chamber. Instead, the room was lit up like a surgery. Seated on an organiform couch was the priestess. Her head was shaved, her eyes without pupils, a milky white. My own gaze seemed drawn down them, deep down to where Babylon dwelled, beneath the moon's surface.

She was the most awesome thing I had yet seen in Babylon. I couldn't even think of her as human.

The Sisters began their account, even their usual bravado noticeably shaken.

When they were finished, we waited.

After what seemed like eternity cubed, the priestess spoke.

Two words.

"Red dragon."

I was still trying puzzle out the significance of the phrase when the Sisters knocked me to the floor with twin shrieks.

They grabbed at my neck, and pulled the ambassador's chop right off, breaking the chain and gouging the back of my neck.

"Of course!"

"What idiots!"

"It *was* right under our noses!"

I got to my feet, rubbing my sore neck. "You don't mean –"

"But we do! The Conservancy is looking for this string too."

"And your diplomat must have been bringing sightings to your father."

"But now they're ours –"

"– thanks to wonderful, wonderful Sandy."

"And if they're complementary to what we've got –"

"– which they almost have to be –"

"– then we'll know the coordinates for the string –"

"– and can sell it to Babylon –"

"– for the price of a planet!"

The priestess had sat silent through our display, unaffected by our merely human emotions. We left the temple then, and headed home.

I stopped on the way at an infirmary to get my sore neck attended to.

"We'll meet you home, Sandy –"

"– for more celebrating."

"Even extra special –"

"– this time."

At that moment, I didn't get what they meant.

Home again, I heard noises filtering down a corridor from the pleasureparlour.

I ambled down the dimly biolit hall. In the doorway, I stopped dead.

I couldn't untangle the scene at first. I flashbaked on my lone view of the refectory, so long ago. This was the same, but different.

Scaled limbs bisected expanses of pink flesh. Hooves dimpled tailed saurian haunches. Thighs occulted faces tongues unlike anything human lapped webbed feet braced for a thrust backs arched in pleasure wet engulfings hard lengths grunts cries growls teeth flashing aliens lying where once I no no no no –

"No!" I screamed.

And ran.

My destiny.

I came to myself at the lock leading to the spacefield. Still half crazy, I looked around for a nonliving suit, intending to get out to a ship and flee across as many galaxies as I could.

But nothing was available except quilts.

And I couldn't use them.

So I slumped down to the pavement, back against the dome wall, dropping my head in my hands. Jezebel and Judith, those witches, those whores of Babylon, seemed to have driven a spike right into my skull.

I strove to think around it.

Where was I going to go? Back to the Conservancy? I was totally unfitted for life there. To another Commensality world? I'd still have to face the same set of dilemmas as here. A neutral world, then. I'd go to a neutral world, a backwater where I could avoid choosing between these disparate star-sweeping ideologies that contended for an individual's soul nowadays.

But I knew this was impossible too. Because – damn it! – no matter where you fled today, anywhere else was just a blink away.

So I gave up thinking and began to cry.

After a while I realized someone was standing watching me.

I opened my swollen eyes.

I didn't see hooves.

So I looked up.

A nondescript human male stood beside me. His face was empty of any expression, like a world devoid of weather.

Deadface –

Moreover, he was the same man who had stopped me in my father's hall ages ago, and ordered me to fetch the ambassador's chop.

"Babylon," I whispered.

"Yes," said the cored one. "It's me. Look, just what do you think you're doing?"

I had expected any question but this. "What – I don't know what you mean."

"Running away, that's what I mean. When are you going to face up to reality? If you don't like what the Sisters did, confront them with it. They are what they are, the same as you. Running away won't change that. But

it will lose you whatever you had."

I grunted with all the cynicism I could muster. "And what was that? The delusions of a pet."

"You know that's not true. Look at what just happened. Besides holding the final key to everything – not entirely accidentally, either – you played your part with Stoat. And very slick it was. I personally think you have a future in this business. Why don't you go back and work things out?"

"What's your stake in all this?" I demanded.

"Information is my lifeblood. And people like the Sisters help it breed. I try to keep them happy. You seem to be good for them. And they for you."

I thought. "I – I don't know."

Babylon shrugged stiffly. "You'll never find out by running away."

I got to my feet. Babylon stared at me wordlessly for a while, then said, "Don't decide now. Just come with me on one last excursion. You more or less have to anyway."

I had a hint of what he meant.

## 13 The First Chapter

Babylon had to clone the diplomat to use his chop. He dug out a few of the dead man's epidermal cells from a crevice in the dragon. When the mindless clone was fully force-grown (how creepy it felt to stare into the face of the man I had killed), the chop, keyed to the individual's unique bioaura, gave up its secrets.

Almost before I knew it, Ace – that was the old human name of Babylon's extension – the Sisters and I were in a special little ship. (They had had to carry me, quilt-wrapped, out the dome.) An instant later, we had made a transition halfway across the galaxy, to where the loop of string was located.

"Now," Ace explained without inflection, "in Riemanian space, the fourth dimension is obviously time, and we may travel along it in only one direction. In the vicinity of this string, with its extra six dimensions accessible, our latest theories inform us that we should be able to move backward along the temporal dimension.

"We are here to prove it."

The Sisters were huddled together in a cabin corner, feeling lost without their TAPS. I was in the opposite corner. We had had a big fight once reunited, and they weren't talking to me, nor I to them.

"This is crazy," I said. But all the time I really knew deep down it wasn't.

"What would you know, you archaic Conservator?" spat Judy.

"Yeah, you sexual fossil!" contributed Jezzie.

That got me mad. "For your information, you two bitches, I know where – I mean when – we're travelling to."

That seemed to floor them.

It was the first time I had ever done so.

Maybe I was learning something after all.

Ace moved to the boards and did something.

We moved along the six dimensions normally hidden inside your average electron. For a timeless eternity, the uncanny passage assaulted our senses horribly. Then the universe looked the same in the viewers. Next, Ace made

a standard Heisenberg transition. After that –

Well, why should I belabour the obvious? We landed on my home planet. Concealed in capes and irksome boots, the Sisters passed for non-moddies as we passed through the city. My bare feet met with few stares in the summertime warmth. I provided ingress through the security perimeter around my home.

As soon as we were inside my father's mansion, Jezzie said, "These boots hurt, I'm taking them off." Judy followed suit.

Pretty soon the Sisters and I were standing behind the arras, peeking out through a slit.

I saw my younger self nearly run into Ace. The Sisters stifled their laughter. I must admit I did look cloddish, stupid and scared. It was hard to imagine that was really me. I had to keep reminding myself that I wasn't as dumb then – I mean now – as I looked.

Or had I been?

After Ace sent the early me back for the diplomat's chop, we came out from hiding, the Sisters resumed their disguises, and we returned to our ship.

At least I assumed we did, as we must have. I don't really remember much from the next few hours. I was too bewildered, deep in thought about my past and future.

Once more in the stellar neighbourhood of our gateway back home, I finally returned to myself.

If someone without emotions could gloat, Ace was gloating. "This moves the struggle with the Conservancy onto a completely new level. We must make use of this temporal ability before they match us." He went off into deep thought.

The Sisters meanwhile eyed me speculatively from across the cabin. Finally, one spoke.

"Interesting times ahead, Sandy."

"Another mind and pair of hands is always welcome in our game."

"Seems a shame to break up a good team, just because of a little indiscretion."

"What do you say?"

I paused.

"TAP me for an answer when we get back home."

**Paul Di Filippo**, born 1954, has published numerous books in recent years, including *The Steampunk Trilogy* (1995), *Ribofunk* (1996), *Fractal Paisleys* (1997), *Lost Pages* (1998) and *Joe's Liver* (Cambrian Publications, 2000). He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and his most recent stories here were "Singing Each to Each" (IZ 155) and "Return to Cockaigne" (IZ 163).

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# Restoring the Balance, 2

*Tony Ballantyne*

Walking from the night into the sterile white light of the burger bar was like rejoining the dreams of her broken sleep. Kaye stood for a moment, her ears filled with the soft sound of vibraphones piped through speakers, and tried to adjust to the vague unreality. Out of bed and out of her house at half past three on a Wednesday morning: 25 minutes since the phone call.

Kaye always slept with her mobile beneath the pillow, her hand wrapped around it for comfort. Often she would chat to another insomniac friend in the lonely hours whilst her brother slept. Tonight she had been woken from a rare deep sleep by the phone's muffled ringing. She had fumbled for the okay button and then blinked as the little screen cast a square of light into the dim room.

"I was sleeping," she had muttered. The caller didn't seem to care.

"Good morning, Kaye. For 15,000 pounds, would you get up in the middle of the night and drive to a restaurant to pick up a man?"

Kaye had shaken her head to clear the drowsiness away. The speaker had a foreign twang to his voice. American, or maybe Australian. Kaye was too dazed to tell.

"I'm sorry. Who is this?" she mumbled.

"Of course you would," said the voice. Kaye sat up in bed. The sound of the strange voice in the silence of the room unnerved her. Tinny and distant, the contrast made her words seemed to fill the air and invite attention. She pulled the duvet closer around her and listened to the voice.

"We've rated your personality to the nearest point zero one. We know you'll do it. Wait until you've woken up a bit more and you'll see that we're right."

A spark of anger kindled in Kaye's stomach.

"You don't know me," she muttered. "Go away and stop bothering me."

"Of course we know you," chuckled the voice. "You own a store card, don't you? You use a computer? There are records stored on databases detailing everything from your shoe size to your dosage of medication for depression to your time spent running on the treadmill at the gym. We know everything about your personality. We are so confident you'll agree to our request that we've already transferred the money to your account."

There was a pause. Kaye keyed a combination on her

mobile.

"I'll bet you're looking at the details right now," teased the voice. "You can see that it's all there."

Kaye froze as the numbers scrolled across the orange screen. She pushed cancel and sat up straight. She was thoroughly awake now.

"I want 20,000."

"No you don't," laughed the voice. "Fifteen thousand clears your debts and leaves you just enough left over for the deposit on that new Renault you've been looking at on the web. You won't risk bargaining and you know it. It's not in your psychological profile. Now listen carefully; here are your instructions..."

Kaye had quickly realized there was no point in arguing. She rose and left the flat without bothering to tell her brother. He would have no trouble finding her when he woke up, after all.

Now she stood at the counter of the burger restaurant, ordering a coffee and a CheeseSub. The young man behind the counter wore a relaxed expression that marked him as a fellow MTPH user. She nodded to him in recognition of the fact as she collected her purchases and then went and sat at a table near the toilets, as instructed. There were only a few people in the restaurant. Tired old men nursing cups of coffee in the warmth, a few nightshift business people and one young couple arguing in soft voices. She sipped her coffee and looked around for her contact but there was no sign of him.

Kaye unwrapped the plastic-coated paper from the warm roll and took a bite from the cheese-covered meat substitute inside. Despite what others said, the soft, greasy food always seemed to taste delicious to her. She gave a start as she realized someone was sitting beside her. She half shouted in her surprise.

"Where did you come from?"

"Keep your voice down," said the stranger. He was tall and well built. His short-cropped blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, together with his erect posture, marked him as different from the other customers. He held out a hand.

"I'm Joshua. I'd like to say thank you for helping me."

Kaye took another bite of the burger.

"I'm only doing it for the money," she said through a

mouthful of food. She paused, thoughtfully. "Are you American?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," said Joshua. He withdrew the hand and gave the room a cursory glance. "Come on. We'd better get out of here."

"When I've finished eating," said Kaye.

"No. Now." Joshua's voice was calm and matter of fact. He rose to his feet and held out one arm for Kaye. With bad grace she rose to her feet and slipped her hand through his arm. She tried to pick up her coffee in the other hand, the one holding the burger.

"I'll take that," said Joshua. They left the restaurant like any normal couple, Joshua even holding open the door as Kaye stepped into the chill of the night.

"Where's your car?" asked Joshua.

"Over there by the bins. Hey! That's my coffee!"

Kaye's voice was high-pitched with indignation. Joshua had tipped the steaming liquid over the gravelled strips of garden that ran beside the path. Now he idly crumpled the cup as he walked in silence towards Kaye's battered red car. He threw the cup into a nearby bin and ran an appraising look over the vehicle.

"This machine is dangerous," he said. "You should consider purchasing a new one."

"You think so, do you? Why, exactly, do you think I'm helping you out?" Kaye pulled the keys from her pocket and walked to the driver's door.

Joshua shook his head and held out his hand. "I thought the instructions made it clear. I'll drive."

Kaye shook her head in imitation of Joshua.

"No way. I don't like your attitude, mate. I don't get out of bed at three in the morning to be treated like this. Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to throw away my coffee?"

Joshua frowned. He seemed confused.

"Why are you being so contrary? You're being paid for your work. I thought we'd bought your co-operation." He paused, thinking. When he spoke again, his tone was more wheedling.

"Kaye, please understand. This operation is planned to the nearest ten seconds. It is vital that I drive. Only I have the skill to keep to the schedule."

Kaye stared at him, arms crossed.

"Please?" he said.

Kaye smiled. "Very well." She tossed him the keys and walked around to the passenger door.

Kaye couldn't place it, but there was an air of competence to Joshua's driving that made him stand out from the norm. Maybe it was the economy of movement, the way he barely seemed to have to touch the controls to make the vehicle respond exactly to his wishes, or maybe it was just the way the car always seemed to be where it should be. Behind the wheel, Joshua seemed perfectly calm: almost a part of the car itself. His expression was almost vacant, as if his intelligence had left his body and now lived in the machinery. The only time he showed any sign of emotion was when they stopped at a red light not far from the burger restaurant. There, he bit his lip and squeezed the wheel. Kaye heard his faint intake of breath.

"No!" he whispered. "This shouldn't have happened. The delay at the burger bar!" The emotion passed as quickly as it arrived, and Joshua re-merged with the vehicle. They headed out of the city, following the wide roads that cut a path through the sleeping buildings. Eventually Joshua pulled on the wheel and sent them down a slip road onto a motorway. The city was quickly left behind, the low dark curves of the countryside rose up around them.

They travelled in silence. Ahead of them, the occasional set of red taillights bobbed in and out of view. Kaye suddenly felt very alone.

"Where are we going?" she asked timidly. Joshua ignored her. Kaye bit her lip. The full magnitude of what she had done suddenly hit her. Less than an hour ago she had lain asleep in bed. Now she sat in her car, being driven who knows where by a complete stranger. Crime happened so rarely nowadays that people had become too trusting, and yet you still heard stories of people found dead, far from home. Kaye's hands began to shake. She reached forward and fumbled in the glove compartment. She felt a plastic bag containing a few white rocks of her brother's MTPH. She could feel his presence, somewhere in the car behind her, and it reassured her slightly.

Her cigarettes lay behind the bag, she removed one and squeezed the end so that it ignited. As she was taking her first drag Joshua snatched the cigarette from her hand, wound down the window and tossed it into the freezing wind. Kaye watched the tiny trail of brief sparks bouncing along behind the car and then turned to Joshua in anger.

"What on earth did you do that for?"

"Cigarettes are bad," said Joshua.

Kaye gazed at the shape of the tall, blonde, muscled giant that sat beside her, lit by the slow strobe of the motorway lights. A nagging suspicion that had ridden inside her slowly ripened.

"You're a Stealth Warrior, aren't you?" she said.

Kaye felt the faintest of movements in the car's hitherto perfect motion. Joshua was trying not to reveal his surprise. Kaye pressed home her advantage.

"You are, aren't you?"

"How do you know that?" whispered Joshua. "I thought no one believed in us."

Kaye gave a sudden laugh. "Most people don't. Most people are idiots who won't believe the truth even when it's pushed under their noses. I saw the wing tip of a stealth bomber once..."

Her voice faded as she remembered the scene. Early one crisp February morning, walking to work up the high street. Just a few people around, unloading boxes from lorries and pulling up the morning shutters. A trail of shattered glass and cracked paving stones travelled up the street in leaps and hops, and there, at the end of the trail, badly scratched and twisted but still crazily reflecting the scene in its silvered surface, a piece of metal slightly larger than Kaye. The tip of a wing. Two police-women stood by it, one speaking into her wrist radio. Kaye walked to the piece of shattered aeroplane to get a better look. If the rumours were true the night sky was

full of these machines, criss-crossing the country on their inscrutable business. Kaye would lie during insomniac nights imagining the sky above her room, imagining the planes travelling unchallenged over the city. Now someone had brought one of them down, knocked it from its lofty pedestal to rejoin the real world.

"We got one, eh?" Kaye had said to the policewoman, oddly proud. The policewoman had frowned and tilted her head.

"Got what?" she said. "This is part of a radio mast. It was torn off by high winds in Essex last night and blown all the way through the city into South Street."

"A radio mast?" laughed Kaye, and walked off to catch the train to work. But by the time she had got home that night the mess had been cleared and everyone was talking about the lucky escape they had had from the storm. Did you hear about that tower struck down?

Now she sat in her speeding car next to one of the blonde angels who flew over her country on their mysterious errands. She tried to keep the awe out of her voice, as if she spoke to his kind every day.

"So. You are a Stealth Warrior. What are you doing over here?"

"I was brought down during an attack on a brewery. Fortunately, I had already dropped my bombs."

"A brewery?" Kaye could not keep the disbelief from her voice. Joshua showed no sign of embarrassment. The car continued smoothly down the motorway. Somewhere ahead there was the flash of oncoming headlights cresting a hill.

Joshua continued to speak. "I'm still not sure what happened. A Trojan in the onboard software designed to trigger itself when some corporation's interests are compromised, probably. Didn't like me attacking their property. One moment I'm checking the target was hit, the next I'm fighting for control of the plane. I was lucky to bail out."

Kaye's brother chose that moment to wake up. He sat up on the back seat and yawned loudly.

"What's up? Where are we going to?" he mumbled.

Kaye told him to be quiet and turned back to Joshua. "You were attacking a brewery?" she repeated.

Joshua nodded slowly. "Yes. You sound surprised. Don't you support the war on drugs?"

"Well yes, but..." Her voice tailed off.

Her brother yawned again and rubbed his eyes. He spoke in a tired voice. "Look at him, Kaye. He's Mr Clean. Probably part of one of the extremist wings of the American FDA. Just be quiet for the moment and let him tell his story."

Kaye closed her mouth and quietly fumed at her brother as Joshua continued speaking.

"I came down on the waste ground near Downey Park industrial estate. The plane's escape system is designed to be fast-degradable. This one degraded a little too fast: it began disintegrating in mid-air. I was screaming with terror as I hit the ground."

Kaye was surprised and a little impressed by this frank admission. Her brother snorted on the back seat. Kaye ignored him and looked with new respect at the

calm blonde giant smoothly guiding her car down the motorway.

"You're surprised at my terror?" said Joshua. "You can't imagine. We fly over your countries, and yet we never leave home, safe in our sealed cockpits."

He shuddered. Kaye felt it in the way the car veered slightly from its course.

"Our worst fear is to be hit. To be rudely forced to join your world, lost in a strange land with the enemy searching for us. Control pulls out all the stops when a flyer is down. Right now everything is bent towards getting me out of here."

"You hope," said Kaye's brother from the back seat. He sighed. "Hey, Kaye. I'm feeling a little drawn here. Give me a rock of MTPH."

Kaye told him to wait.

"The enemy will know where my plane came down. If Control sends in a lander to my crash location the enemy will see it and take it out. Control has to get me away from the scene of the crash, but carefully. The enemy will be monitoring the area, looking for unusual activity."

"So they phoned me?" said Kaye. "Thank you. How dare you get me involved in your war games? Putting my life in danger for £15,000? That wasn't part of the contract."

"The danger to you is minimal," replied Joshua calmly. "You can't keep it a stealth war if you go around killing civilians. Besides, you agreed the price. There was no coercion."

"The price isn't fair. Fifteen thousand pounds is a lot more to me than it is to you."

Kaye really needed a cigarette. She began to fiddle with the toggles of her jacket, twisting them back and forth. Something occurred to her.

"Anyway. If the enemy is monitoring the area won't it know I was phoned? Won't it find it odd that I left the house at three in the morning?"

"Possibly," conceded Joshua. "However, more than one phone call will have been made. Decoys. It's amazing what you can get people to do with a little money and a knowledge of their personalities. You'll be way down the observation list. You have gone off with men in the middle of the night before. Your promiscuity is a matter of record."

Kaye's brother began laughing loudly on the back seat. Kaye's mouth dropped open in disbelief.

"Promiscuous? Me?" she spluttered. "I've had three boyfriends in the past four years. And they weren't exactly relationships to write home about. Promiscuous? Chance would be a fine thing."

Joshua wore a pious look. "I remained chaste until my wedding day," he said demurely.

"How do you know all these things about me?" said Kaye angrily.

"I was e-dumped your full personality profile before I met you at the..." His voice tailed away as they crested the brow of a hill and began their descent. Something was burning on the road ahead. The crumpled shape of a car lying on its back, wheels still slowly turning as streamers of smoke rose into the air, dissolving into the night. Yellow flames bloomed from the bonnet.



"Hey..." croaked Kaye. "That car is the same as mine..." A horrible realization arose in her mind. As she spoke Joshua sent the car into a long skid. The rear end slewed wide and the whole car began to turn. A perfect straight line of hazy violet light lanced down from the night sky and speared the road ahead of them. Joshua pushed and pulled at the wheel to end the drift and gunned the engine, sending the car back the way they had come. Headlights suddenly loomed ahead of them and Joshua spun the wheel again sending them onto the hard shoulder. Kaye caught a flicker of light in the corner of her eye. Joshua sent the car into another spin. Kaye felt as if she was going to be sick. Her hands clutched the side of the seat as she was rocked backwards and forwards. Joshua appeared perfectly impassive as he sent the vehicle dodging down the road. If Kaye weren't so sick she would have admired his skill.

Her brother spoke up from the back seat. "I don't think this will last much longer, Kaye."

Kaye snarled at him, asking what the hell he knew. His calm, analytical tones annoyed her. He pretended not to notice her tone.

"These guys operate by stealth. Whoever fired on us will have given away their position. I guess someone will be taking countermeasures even as we speak."

Even as he spoke the sky lit up with a bright flash. Joshua slammed on the brakes.

"Get ready to jump out of the car. We're going to make a run for it."

"Don't forget the MTPH," said Kaye's brother.

The car screeched to a halt and Kaye fumbled for the seatbelt release. She pulled the plastic bag from the glove compartment and ran out into the sodium-lit night. There was another bright flash.

"One all," muttered Kaye's brother. "That would be one of Joshua's side being hit. Do they have another ship in reserve, I wonder?"

Joshua vaulted the car and took hold of Kaye by the arm. He dragged her towards the darkness at the edge of the roadside. A rotten wooden fence marked the boundary between motorway and fields.

"Over the fence," said Joshua calmly. "You'd better stick with me. They've already accidentally killed one civilian. They might not see the point of being careful now."

"And you may provide some cover for Joshua," said her brother cheerfully. Kaye looked at him, confused. "Oh, go with him. At least he knows what's going on," he said. A third flash lit up the sky. There was a trace of enjoyment in her brother's voice. "Two one. One of the enemy destroys the car and gives away its position. Joshua's side destroys the enemy and gives away its own position and is then destroyed by another one of the enemy, which is then destroyed by one of Joshua's. Yes. That makes sense."

Kaye scrambled over the fence and tumbled down onto cold, frozen ground. Her hands pushed through a layer of hard frost into the icy earth beneath. Her whole body was pinched by the freezing night.

"This coat is too thin. Let me get a blanket from the car."

"No time," said Joshua, pulling her up and then pushing her to run down the gentle slope of the field. She stag-

gered across the uneven surface, tripping and sliding, Joshua holding onto her arm and keeping her moving. Her breath came in cold rasps and she felt a tightness beginning across her chest.

"Stop," she gasped. "Asthma."

"Not much further," said Joshua. "We need to give the lander a clear run."

He pulled her onwards, down to the bottom of the gentle slope before allowing her to stop, bending forward, hands on her knees as she wheezed and gasped for breath. She could just make out the silhouette of Joshua gazing up at the clear sky.

She asked her brother what the hell she was doing here. Only two hours ago she had been sleeping safe in bed. Now she stood knee-deep in mud in a cabbage field somewhere in the middle of the country.

"You can see things moving up there," said her brother, gazing at the sky. "Stealth planes. They keep blocking out the stars. Come on. Take some MTPH."

Joshua finished his search of the stars, turned and squatted before Kaye. Her eyes were becoming acclimated to the frosty light of the stars. Joshua's voice was low.

"We're playing a game of chess, Kaye. Two hundred years ago guns had a range of less than 50 metres. Soldiers had to dress up in bright colours to see each other before they could begin shooting. Now that we can kill from hundreds of miles away your first shot is your last. It gives away your position."

Joshua went quiet. When he spoke again his voice was thoughtful. "This is a mess. At least three people have already died tonight. They'll probably try to negotiate a settlement before the costs really escalate. This is all due to the enemy shooting the wrong car. They thought they were tracking us up the motorway, but all the time we were a couple of minutes behind their actual target. Something threw us off schedule." He paused, and continued thoughtfully. "The way you argued outside the burger bar."

He straightened up and began to pace. "You argued with me, Kaye. Argued about who was going to drive. That wasn't in your profile. Something about you isn't quite right." He paused again. "Hey! What's that in your hand?"

Kaye tried to pull the bag away from him, but he moved too quickly. He snatched the MTPH from her hand. Her brother called out in dismay.

Joshua's voice was filled with disgust. "Drugs!" he said. "You lowlife vermin."

Kaye was surprised to feel more hurt than angry. "Don't call me that," she said in a little voice. "It's only MTPH."

Joshua couldn't keep the loathing from his voice. "Only MTPH? That stuff is the worst. Don't you have any sense of social responsibility? This filth nearly destroyed western democracy."

"Yes," said her brother. "Because anyone can make it and it costs nothing. It strikes at the heart of the capitalist system. Free pleasure."

Joshua couldn't hear him. He gazed at Kaye in disgust.

"That was before it was understood," whispered Kaye, defensively. "People got themselves hooked on the drug."

They didn't know how to transfer the dependency onto their projection."

"Your projection? Is that what you call it? Where is it?"

"My brother. He's standing behind you."

Joshua kicked at the ground in anger. "Your brother? He doesn't exist, you know that? He's just a part of your brain spurred into independent life by the drug. Another personality living in your mind."

"I know that," said Kaye humbly. "But when you've got no money, few friends and your every move is mapped out in advance by unseen powers, you make do with what you can."

Joshua shook his head sadly. "You're a pawn, girl. Do you know where that filth came from? The east. A plot to destabilize society. It almost worked. It could still work if enough of you go over to it."

Kaye's brother gave a sarcastic laugh. "This is a man who's over here to bomb our off-licenses. Don't let him upset you with his puritanical views."

Kaye nodded sadly in agreement. She wrapped her hands around her body and hugged herself. She had stopped shivering; now the cold ached in her hands and her ears. She gazed around the silent night, at the flat darkness of the ground and the magnitude of the rolling clouds of stars that lit up the sky. It all looked so peaceful and undisturbed she found it hard to believe a battle was raging unseen above her. She tried to change the subject.

"Who are you fighting, anyway? The government?"

Joshua gave a little laugh. "The government?" He shook his head and chuckled. "The only policy your government has is to hide how little influence it really has over what goes on in your country. No. The true powers in this world keep themselves hidden. That's what stealth war is all about. All you get to see is the public face. It's not good publicity for a multi-national corporation to let you know it maintains a private air force to defend its interests. When you're fighting a religious war, keeping your army hidden allows you to put a more acceptable face on your extremist views."

"Extremist views, eh?" said Kaye. "Like wanting to bomb a brewery?"

"Drugs, girl. What if I told you that you used to live no more than five minutes from one of the major entry ports of cocaine into your country? Who do you think developed the fungus that wiped out the coca plants? Would you like the crack-heads living down your street again?"

"Oh shut him up," said Kaye's brother. "I can't bear to hear him justify himself. Ask him how he can drive that car so well."

"Is that your brother speaking?" said Joshua suddenly. He took Kaye's hand, making her jump. "You seem to relax when he speaks, like he's taking over your brain."

Kaye ignored him. "How can you drive so well?" she said.

"That wasn't your question, was it? That was your demon," said Joshua.

"My demon?"

"It's possessing you. It's feeding on the drug."

"Nonsense. He complements my intelligences. I have low spatial awareness, his is high. His language skills are lacking, mine are good. He complements me."

"Maybe that's just what it wants you to believe. You're in Satan's grasp, girl."

"He's changing the subject," said Kaye's brother. "Ask him again."

She wondered why her brother kept pushing the point, but she asked Joshua again nonetheless. "How can you drive so well?"

Joshua shook his head. "I don't have any truck with demons."

Something vibrated against Kaye's leg. She frowned, and then realization dawned. It was her mobile phone. Who could be ringing her at this time of the morning? She pulled out the phone and pressed okay.

"Hello?" she said rather hesitantly, looking questioningly at Joshua.

"Good morning, Kaye. Nice to speak to you again."

Kaye frowned for a moment and then realized she was hearing the voice that had phoned earlier that night.

"I wish I could say the same," she said brusquely. "What's going on? This wasn't part of the agreement."

"I know. Circumstances beyond our control. We've been listening via directional mikes. We didn't realize you were a junky, but then MTPH is such a difficult drug to monitor. We can't track any purchases, as you don't buy it, you just boil up another batch from yesterday's stock. Any effect of the complementary personality is counted as part of your total personality profile. Only the slightest of wobbles gives the game away. If we'd known you were on MTPH we probably wouldn't have recruited you tonight. That would have been unfortunate as that slight wobble in your profile is probably what saved Joshua."

"I hope he's worth it," she snapped.

Kaye glared at Joshua, who simply turned his back on her and began to scan the heavens again.

The voice continued. "Oh yes. A good pilot takes years to train. Anyway, we have reached an arrangement that is to the satisfaction of all parties involved in tonight's conflict, and shortly we shall be sending in a lander to retrieve Joshua."

"What sort of arrangement?"

"One that avoids further loss of expensive equipment and personnel. One that just leaves one loose end to tie up. You. You seem to have acquired more knowledge during the course of this evening than was our original intention. We would like to buy your silence for £50,000."

Kaye spun on her heel and began to pace across the cold muddy field. Her breath was frosty in the pale glow of the mobile's screen. Her reply was quite definite.

"One hundred thousand," she said, and she knew that this time she would not settle for anything less.

"Of course," said the voice. "We knew that you would double any offer we made. The funds have been transferred. Bye."

Kaye pulled the phone from her ear and stared at it in disgust. Tricked again. She turned around to take out her frustration on Joshua, but the field was empty. On the horizon, the pale glow of the false dawn lit up the sky.

Kaye was wheezing as she picked her way back up the embankment to the motorway. A brand new Renault

stood waiting on the hard shoulder.

"They're trying to buy your silence," said her brother.

Kaye felt tired and miserable, she felt the cold pressing against her skin and tearing at her lungs. She made no attempt to keep the contempt from her voice.

"They've already bought it," she said.

"The person you feel most contempt for is yourself," said her brother to no one in particular.

The keys waited in the ignition. Kaye slipped into the soft leather driver's seat and pulled into the light traffic.

"No sign of your old car," said her brother.

She pointedly turned on the radio. Early morning music filled the comfortably warm interior. She stabbed at a button until she found a news channel.

It had been a quiet night: the public safety bill restricting the sale of non-genetically modified food had gone through unopposed. On the day that showed the 20th consecutive fall in annual crime figures a woman had been arrested for plotting a copyright theft; the police remained quiet as to who had tipped them off. The news of an accidental fire in a brewery in Nottinghamshire was buried towards the end of the report.

An exit ramp approached. Kaye ran the car up the ramp, around a roundabout and back onto the motorway, heading back to South Street.

"I need a drink," she said.

"I need a rock of MTPH," said her brother.

"When we get home." She fumbled for her mobile and called the supermarket.

"What special offers do you have on whisky?" she asked.

"Buy two Jameson's, get one free, Kaye."

"I'll go for that. Send it round straightaway."

A brief pause and then the voice spoke again. "I'm sorry, Kaye. Your credit is not good for that transaction."

"What?" Kaye pushed a button and checked her account. Had she been cheated? No. The money was all there. "I've got over £100,000 to my name," she said, with a touch of smug satisfaction.

"Ah yes, but that money is marked not be spent on unsuitable goods. How about some Sunny-O-range juice? Buy three cartons and we'll throw in a Sta-Cool Jug."

"No, thank you," said Kaye, calmly breaking the connection. She opened her mouth to swear, but she caught her brother grinning at her from the passenger seat.

"That's what you get for dealing with Mormons," he said.

"They weren't Mormons."

"I know. Mormons wouldn't send Joshua out ripped to the tits on MTPH."

"What?"

"I thought you hadn't noticed," her brother laughed.

"How did you think he could drive so well? My guess is that he's developed a secondary personality in his head that mimics whatever he's driving."

Kaye nodded. The idea seemed to make sense. She tried it out. "So instead of having someone like you telling me about what you've seen in my peripheral vision and remembering all those little messages picked up by my subconscious, he thinks he's reading the flight of a plane through its joystick or whatever."

She thought it through and then shook her head. "No.

I don't believe it. You saw how anti-drugs he was."

"He probably doesn't know. I bet they slip it into his food."

"Wow," said Kaye.

Her brother sighed. "Kaye, no one really says 'Wow'."

She ignored him. "Just think. Fighting the evil eastern menace, and all the time he's hooked on their drug."

Her brother gave a condescending smile. "No. I think it's the other way around. This drug was developed to help pilots like Joshua, and somehow it got out. It slipped out to distort the very fabric of the society they were trying to protect."

He sighed, leant back in his seat and gazed at the upholstered ceiling. "You know, when people first began to take MTPH they thought it was putting them in touch with Gaia. Restoring the natural balance of the Earth. That was nonsense, of course, but you have to admit there is a certain symmetry here. MTPH may help Stealth Forces control the world, but in a society where a map of your personality can be bought for a few pounds, it's becoming the only thing that gives us any appearance of free will."

The traffic density was increasing as dawn approached. Kaye's fingers and ears were warm now. She drove in silence, two people speaking in a car containing only a driver.

"So what? They still control us," she said.

"Ah yes," said her brother. "But maybe this is where the balance starts to tip back a little. I wonder if Joshua would be so keen to fly if he knew the truth? What if you were to tell everyone what we suspect?"

"They wouldn't believe me."

"I don't know. Get on the net, send out a few messages. Somebody would pick up on it and start the rumours spreading. Maybe get Joshua and his pals to start asking a few questions."

Kaye bit her lip. "No, they bought my silence. They know I won't speak. What will people think of me if I break a contract?"

"That's a good point," said her brother. The car drove south along the motorway. Ahead of them, the tip of the sun peeked above the horizon. Her brother leant forward and gave a slow smile.

"But they didn't buy *my* silence. Put yourself under deep hypnosis so your personality recedes and let mine do the talking."

Kaye didn't say anything. Her brother always had a way of getting carried away with his schemes. He needed her to keep his metaphorical feet on the metaphorical ground. Still, as the rising sun filled in the details of the landscape around her, taking away the uncertainty of only a couple of hours before, she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face. It was nice to think that, just as the daylight sent the night armies scuttling back to their hiding places, for once in her life she might have a way to begin restoring the balance, too.

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**Tony Ballantyne** appeared here last month with the story "Restoring the Balance" – to which the above new piece is a stand-alone sequel with entirely different characters. Tony lives in Oldham, Lancashire, and is currently working on a book.



# Lowlife Baroque

*Lucius Shepard*

*interviewed by Nick Gevers*

Lucius Shepard published his first sf story in 1983, and was soon recognized as one of the finest authors of short fiction the speculative genres had yet seen. His early stories (1983-89) were characteristically set in Central America and other parts of the Third World, and evoked the beauty and terror of their locations with a fevered ornate intimacy that recalled Joseph Conrad at his most intense and haunting. The best of Shepard's complex dark fables of this period were assembled in the superb World Fantasy Award-winning collections *The Jaguar Hunter* (1987) and *The Ends of the Earth* (1991); later pieces, such as those gathered in *Barnacle Bill the Spacer* (1997, retitled *Beast of the Heartland in the USA*), were perhaps less sure, less compellingly engaged with the politics of their subject matter, but retained a cogent moral force. Shepard's published novels are *Green Eyes* (1984), a striking foray into the metaphysics of Death, *Life During Wartime* (1987), a dense exploration of Central America through the lens of a future war, *Kalimantan* (1990), a long novella of Borneo here and elsewhere, and *The Golden* (1993), a vibrant apotheosis of the vampire novel.

Shepard is currently embarked on an energetic new phase of his writing career; his skill with the novella form is strongly evident in "Crocodile Rock" (*F&SF*, 1999), "Radiant Green Star" (*Asimov's*, 2000) and "Eternity and Afterward" (*F&SF*, 2001). He has several novels pending.

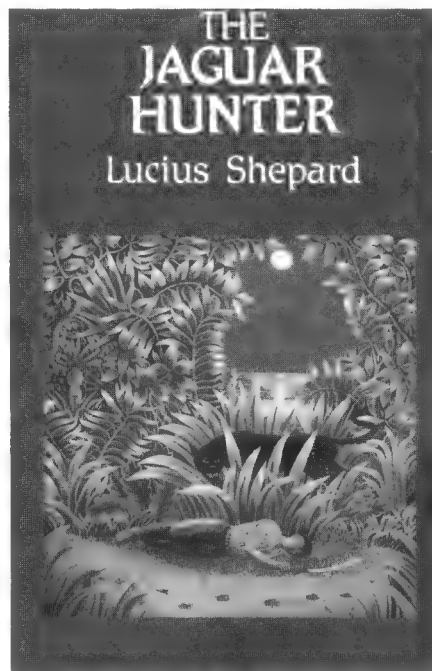
NG: *Your works are characterized by a remarkably opulent style, one baroquely hallucinatory; yet your subject matter – generally at least – is the gritty detail of human adversity: the plight of expatriates, fugitives, hoboes, low-lives, oppressed Third World people, and so forth. How and why did you evolve this unusual (but extremely effective) marriage of style and content?*

LS: My father began teaching me to read when I was three. As soon as I proved capable of parroting words, he had me memorize lengthy passages from Shakespeare and the Romantic poets, also Yeats and Thomas. These writers, with their rhythmic and ornate line, were thus influential in the extreme on my own work. As were the works of Jane Austen, the Brontës, Thomas Hardy, et al. My father had attended Trinity College in Dublin, and admired British and Irish writers. He had been a writer himself and the friend of writers when he was a young man. One of my prize possessions is a letter written to him by William Carlos Williams congratulating him on my birth. Why my father gave up writing, when it seemed he was at the beginning of a career, I have no idea – he was an extremely private (perhaps “closed-off” would be more descriptive) man, and I never understood what he was about. But he determined that if he could not become a writer, I would, and this was the point of my home education. He proceeded to direct me along this path with rather more force than is today deemed healthy or reasonable, and as a result, when I reached my teenage years, I determined that I would *not* become a writer, and I refused to write anything until much later in life. (I did place third in a writing contest in prep school, but I achieved this accolade by plagiarizing a short story by Liam O’Flaherty – I’ve had occasion to wonder what Mr O’Flaherty would have thought about his work coming in third to two high-school kids from Georgia.)

At any rate, this decision not to be a writer, and to offend my father’s sensibilities in every way possible, led me to become a musician, and to cultivate friends of whom he would disapprove – a good many of them small-time drug dealers and various other second- and third-tier criminals. I find as a result that I now enjoy the company of “low-lives” far more than I do that of my colleagues, or the members of any class that would consider themselves elite. The kind of dishonesty one experiences in the company of thieves is of a far less pernicious variety than the sort one experiences when in the company of the so-called upper or educated classes. Even more pertinently, I’ve

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such people.”*

discovered that the companionship of thieves, carnies, hoboes, musicians, et al, affords me access to stories that are more reflective of the life of the world – this, of course, is a completely biased and unsupportable opinion. I’m certain there are wonderful stories to be told that concern the wealthy and the pow-



erful, the erudite and the effete, and so forth. I simply don’t care to hang out with such people.

My father was a member of what is called the Virginia gentry. His family, and my mother’s, owned plantations; their ancestors fought on General Washington’s staff, and they could trace their lineage (or so I was told) back to British nobility. These are matters in which I have a profound disinterest. I like to think that my parent’s line stopped with them. Though my personality incorporates a vestigial and rather ineffectual altruism, a corresponding sense of responsibility, and something that I suppose might be called “taste,” I am myself, for all intents and purposes, a lowlife.

NG: *How autobiographical is your writing? You’re very extensively travelled, you’ve had a colourful and varied life; your stories certainly seem to reflect this experience vividly...*

LS: All my work draws from experience, but that’s hardly a news flash – so does the work of every writer. But a good bit of my work is extremely autobiographical. My first novel, *Green Eyes*, turned out to be a weird invocation of a writer’s workshop I attended – at the time I was writing it I didn’t see this, but now it’s quite clear. Some of my stories (“A Spanish Lesson,” “A Traveller’s Tale,” “Black Coral,” “Life of Buddha,” etc) are very autobiographical in that they reference not only locales I have visited, but states of mind that I have inhabited and actual events in which I played a part. A very few (“The Black Clay Boy,” for instance) are only marginally so. But even the least autobiographical pieces reflect my emotional climate.

NG: *Your early story, “A Spanish Lesson,” famously draws quite an extensive moral at its conclusion; and you appear generally preoccupied with means by which some core of individual integrity can be defended (even if unsuccessfully) against the vicissitudes and temptations of human existence. Are you a moralist at root?*

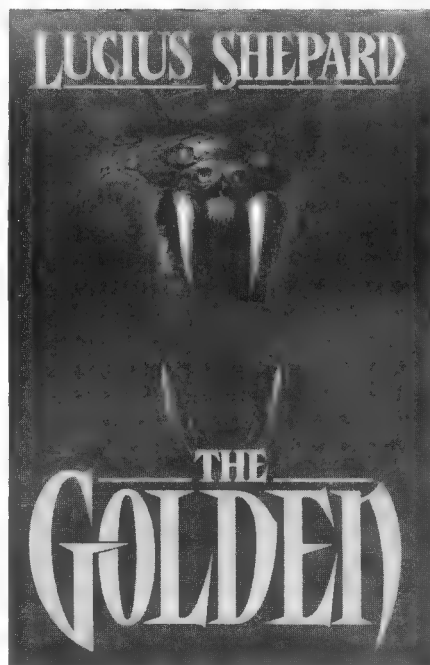
LS: I wrote the ending to “A Spanish Lesson” in response to one of my teachers telling me that a story should never end with a moral. I thought the oldest stories all ended with morals, either implied or otherwise, so what could be wrong with doing so now? As to whether I may be considered a moralist, I feel this is the sort of question best answered by an objective observer. I’m not even sure what a moralist is. Viewed through a postmodern lens, a moralist might well be seen to be an idiot... a label I would resist. When told that my stories display a preoccu-

pation with "...the means by which some core of individual integrity can be defended etc.", I wouldn't deny it out of hand. At the same time, I believe that to a large degree people are actors playing themselves, thus it's entirely possible that at heart I am utterly pragmatic, unromantic, unconcerned with the human condition, and self-deluding. But giving myself the benefit of the doubt, I'll say, Yeah, absolutely.

*NG: Many of your more notable stories of the 1980s, with Life During Wartime as their summation and "Surrender" as their concluding broadside, dealt very critically with the USA's direct and indirect manipulation of the affairs of Central America. What first drew your attention to this issue, and how do you view the present, post-Cold War, state of things in the region, and, by extension, in the Third World generally?*

LS: I've travelled in Central America since I was a child, and lived in the Yucatan and Honduras. It should be evident to one and all that the seven nations that comprise the region are the satellites of the United States. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said about Somoza, the late dictator of Nicaragua, "That Somoza's a son-of-a-bitch, but he's our son-of-a-bitch." It's a matter of record that often when the United States has a need to flex its muscles, whether to impress some third party or to take attention away from domestic ills, it launches a military expedition against a Central American nation. George Bush's adventure in Panama is a textbook example. I recall sitting in my living room and watching a national newscast anchored by Dan Rather on the day of the invasion. Rather turned in an Oscar-worthy display of maiden-auntish outrage at President Manuel Noriega's involvement with the cocaine trade. My God! What a monster! Corrupting America's kiddies! Of course any journalist worth his salt knew long before that day that not only was Noriega a cocaine trafficker, but that it would be difficult to find a former president of Panama who was not a cocaine trafficker. Noriega was merely a patsy, a faithful ally and an enabler of the CIA's regional excesses, whose downfall served temporarily to boost Bush's declining job-approval numbers.

In my opinion, the current state of the region is more-or-less as it has always been. Millions of people live in poverty under the rule of oligarchies and puppets and villains of various other stamps. However, US trade interests in places such as Mexico have made an already brutal environment hellish. For example, the NAFTA trade agreements have trans-



formed Juarez into a nightmarish city where death has seasonal flavour. Autumn, when the drug harvests are made, brings cartel executions and armed struggle. Winter is known for its fires that, started by defective heaters, destroy entire barrios. In the spring the epidemics begin. Summer brings gang war. During the holidays people are prone to hang themselves from trees in the public parks. NAFTA was intended to create jobs, and it has done. The trouble is that the hours are so long and the work so onerous in the NAFTA-created factories, the annual turnover rate in most of them is over 50%, and over 75% in many. The wage paid the women who work in these

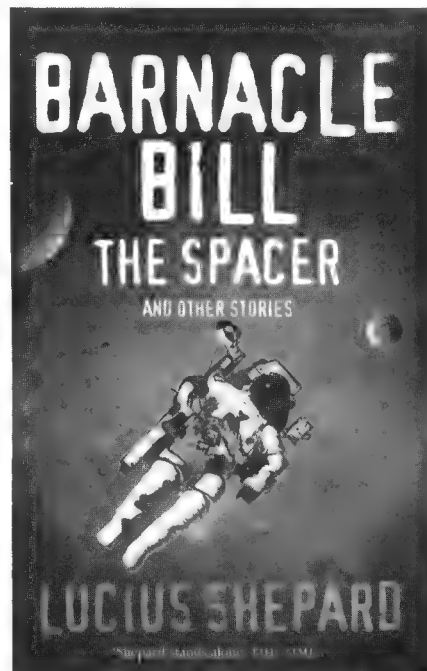
factories is just enough to permit them to make ends meet if they spend their off-hours as prostitutes. The pollution in certain areas of the city ranks with the worst in the world. I spoke with a doctor in an obstetrics clinic in Juarez who told me that once or twice a week she sees catastrophic birth defects of the sort she might ordinarily expect to see two or three times during her career. But it's the bottom line that gets all the attention. To quote one ex-head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Guatemala City, who said smiling: "...these folks will work for nothing 15-16 hours a day, and they don't care about those environmental things."

I fully expect the Gumpish power-mad fratboy who is now America's Top Shithead to copy dear old dad and find a reason to launch military action in the region at some point during the next four years, though it's possible he may forego the tried and true, and head directly to South America so as to escalate the War on Drugs... And what a war it's been! It's a goddamn ad campaign. I will say that it's produced some great T-shirts. Many of the young crack dealers in my neighbourhood treasure those faded Reagan-era Just Say No shirts passed down from their crack-dealing moms and dads.

As for the rest of the Third World, Africa, Southeast Asia, the subcontinent, etc., I don't have any recent experience in those areas, so I only know what I read – but I'd hazard a guess they're not doing any better.

*NG: A periodic sidebar to your Central American stories, featured in "Black Coral," "A Traveller's Tale" and "Aymara," is certain English-speaking but "Sponnish"-ruled Caribbean islands not far offshore. How grounded in reality is this setting?*

LS: The setting of "A Traveller's Tale" and "Black Coral" is in reality the Bay Islands off the north coast of Honduras. In particular, the island of Roatan. At the time I was first there, Roatan was much as described in the stories. It's been considerably built up since, but much of the modernization was erased by a recent hurricane. The inspiration for "A Traveller's Tale" was an actual event – a group of idiots decided that the island was the perfect place from which to contact extraterrestrials and set up an attempted colony in a pestilent spot known as the Burying Ground. All the people in the story are based on people I knew on Roatan. The island is home to the world's greatest storytellers – you can walk into any non-tourist bar and within minutes you'll be regaled by the most amazing tales concerning the local history: gun- and rum-run-





ning and revolution and pirate lore. Jean Baptiste's great treasure is purported to be buried off the west end of the island. In "Aymara" the interview with the old Bay Island fisherman concerning the mercenary soldier Lee Christmas is taken verbatim from tape recordings I made in 1976. It was an amazing experience. The guy was in his late 90s, still hale, but blind from cataracts – as mentioned in the story, the cataracts were so thick that in the lamplight they looked like silver nuggets lodged in his sockets. He recalled the entirety of Christmas's speech to his troops given prior to the Battle of La Ceiba in 1902, part of which I quote in the story. I have so many story ideas as a result of my visits to the islands, I'm quite certain I'll never write them all.

NG: To what extent do you perceive yourself as a "genre" writer? Is your association with sf, fantasy and horror accidental, a result of chance encounters and circumstances, or is it intrinsic?

LS: What I consider myself to be is less important than how I'm seen, and I suppose that now that's as a genre writer. That may change over the next few years. I came into the field by accident more-or-less. A band I was in broke up, one I'd had high hopes for, and I was moping around the house, watching a lot of daytime television. I'd written half a story, and without my knowledge, my then wife, hoping to get me out of the house, sent it in to the Clarion Writers Workshop, which happened to be a genre workshop, and I was accepted. If she had sent the fragment in to a general fiction workshop, I would likely never have written any fantasy. I'm not well read in science fiction and fantasy. As a child I read the usual bits – Tolkien, L. Frank Baum, etc. – but I was never exposed to the writers from the so-called Golden Age of Science Fiction. I did read *The Martian Chronicles* in junior high but thought it overly sentimental. Most of my background in science fiction comes from my days as a musician, when I often looked for some light reading to pass the hours on the road. The first science fiction I read that really zonked me was a book by Jack Vance called *Emphyrio*. After Vance I came to Ballard, Aldiss, Wolfe, and so on down the list.

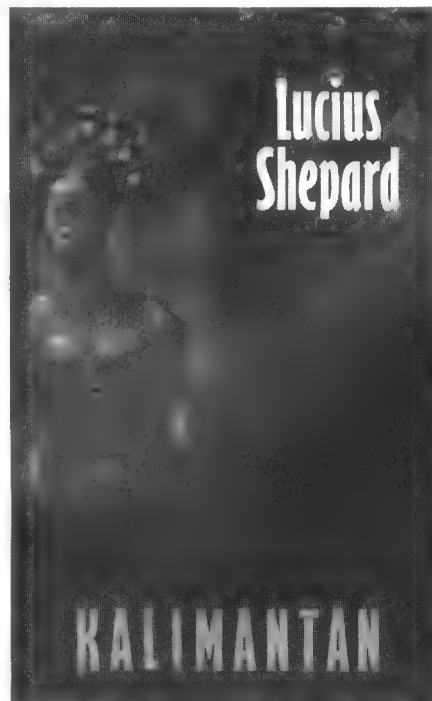
NG: So which contemporary authors, genre and "mainstream," do you most admire?

LS: Among the writers of general fiction I admire are Peter Mathiessen, Josef Svorecky, Denis Johnson, Patrick McCabe, Barbara Manning, Katherine Dunn, Alice Munro, Tim Gatreaux,

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Larry Brown, John Banville, Russell Banks, etc. etc.

As for the genre, I enjoy the work of my contemporaries, but I find less and less new things to interest me. In my view, the genre's gone in the crapper the last 15 years – not much newsworthy has happened in that time other than the proliferation of the series book. I like Ian MacLeod's stuff quite a bit.



Tony Daniel has major potential. Andy Duncan looks like he has some good chops, though I've only read a couple of things. My favourite science-fiction writer remains Jack Vance.

NG: Sports and music are recurrent subjects of your writing – boxing and rock music in particular. How closely involved have you been in these spheres of activity?

LS: I was in rock bands for about ten years, so I know the bottom levels of the music business to an extent. I played a good many of the armpit bars in Michigan and a number of others throughout the Midwestern United States. They were like nasty little churches that celebrated a Saturday night Sabbath and had rituals that involved clumsy dancing and vomiting. I met women who named themselves after their body parts and guys whose tattoos sold drugs. I had a great time, though being the dictator of the bands I was in often proved to be a source of frustration – rock musician is a term that should incorporate the notion of being challenged in its meaning. I consider myself a pretty fair songwriter and I once was a decent singer. Now I just listen.

As for boxing, I boxed amateur as a kid and I'm a devotee of the sport. I also have dabbled in the politics of boxing. Recently another writer (who would prefer to remain anonymous) and I managed to effect some changes in the State of Washington's boxing oversight. Mostly we were interested in stopping matches involving fighters who were on medical suspension in other states. Washington was so lax they licensed a boxer who had been in a coma several months previously. We harassed the commission, started a petition that went the rounds in New York and LA and Las Vegas, all the boxing centres of the USA, and managed to hold the commission's feet to the fire. As a result, the sport in Washington is somewhat cleaner and more protective of the fighters than it was. Which pleases me no end.

NG: Coming more specifically to your modes of writing: you seem especially comfortable at novella length. What is it about the short novel form that attracts you?

LS: Novellas have sufficient length for depth and characterization, and are not long enough to become tedious. Some of my favourite books are novellas – Svorecky's *The Bass Saxophone* and *Emoke*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Death in Venice*, etc. A good many novels I've read lately would have been much better off as short novels, including some large

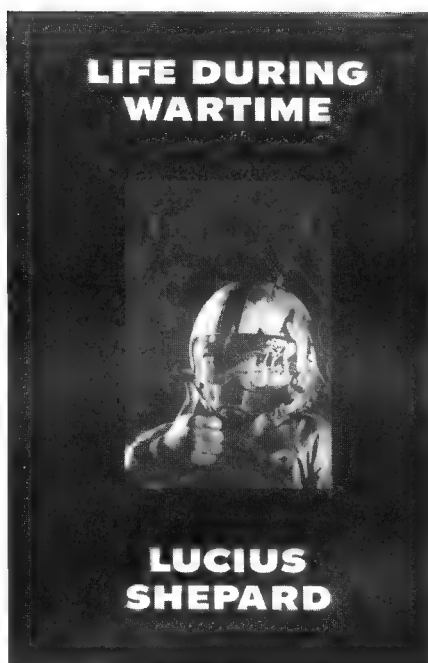
enough to be suitable for use as implementations of execution.

NG: Three especially brilliant novellas of yours, "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule," "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" and "The Father of Stones," have featured the Dragon Griaule, that monstrous epitome of evil influence. How did you conceive of Griaule? What does he in fact represent? And: you've composed a novel to conclude the sequence, haven't you?

LS: The idea for a 6,000-foot-long dragon on and in which people lived occurred to me at the Clarion Writers' Workshop in 1980. One afternoon I went out onto the Michigan State University campus, parked it under a tree, smoked a joint, and started trying to generate story ideas. "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule" was one of the ideas I came up with. I recall I wrote in my notebook the following words: "Big Fucking Dragon." Shortly thereafter I wrote, "Kill him with paint." Surely a moment that will be immortalized in the pantheon of under-the-tree-sitting moments, right up there with Newton and the apple.

I've always hated dragon stories, hated the entire elf-dragon-unicorn axis. The very notion of high fantasy causes my saliva to get thick and ropy. But as an exercise, I was attempting to create a dragon whom I could respect in the morning. As far as what Griaule represents, when I was writing the story he represented a Big Fucking Dragon. I'm an instinctual writer, I rarely have a clue about what I'm doing. Prior to starting a project, I usually have a notion of a beginning and an end, but about the middles, I'm shaky. And as for subtext, theme, et al, I'm totally clueless about these elements until very late in the game. After its publication, some said the story was about the nature and the costs of creativity. Sounds right to me. Looking back, I seem to recall I was thinking a great deal about Ronald Reagan, and I believe now that my subconscious created the dragon as being emblematic of the Republican Party.

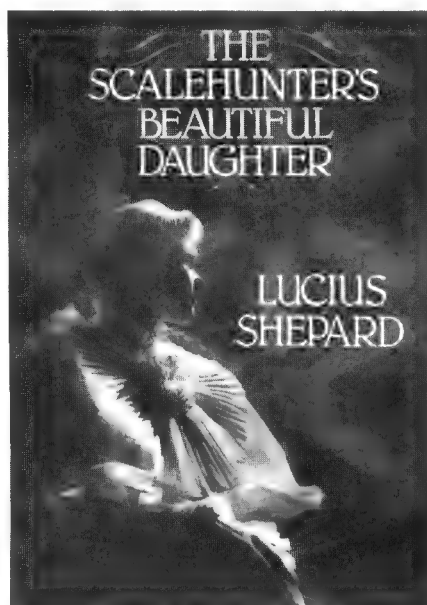
The final part of the Griaule story will be told in a novel called *The Grand Tour*. I should be done with the last rewrite by mid-summer. The main character runs guided tours of Griaule, and the tour referred to by the title is one he leads on the last day of the dragon's life. It is, by turns, a love story and a mystery. And it has a subtitle which I'm certain no publisher will let me use: *The Grand Tour...* "Being the greatest fucking story ever written about a man and a woman in terms of dragon on a rainy March Sunday halfway along to the gravel pit and under..."



The book was not, of course, all written on a rainy March Sunday, but it was on such a day that I dropped several hits of acid and sketched out the plot and a number of the scenes.

NG: Your first two full-dress collections, *The Jaguar Hunter* and *The Ends of the Earth*, are amongst the exceptional books of the last fifteen years, and your third, *Barnacle Bill the Spacer/Beast of the Heartland*, is also impressive. Many of your stories, including several key novellas, remain uncollected; do you have any plans to assemble them in single covers soon?

LS: I have written enough new stories for a collection on their own. I don't propose to collect previously uncollected stories – most of them don't



Lucius Shepard interviewed by Nick strike me as being very good. My last collection was kind of a clean-up collection, and I deeply regret some of the stories it included. In the future I intend to be more discriminating. I'm writing a series of stories based on the experiences I had when doing an article for *Spin* on train tramps or hoboes. A couple of these stories will be put between covers later in the year by Mark V. Ziesing.

NG: You've published only three novels thus far, although you have others in progress or awaiting publication. Which of the three – *Green Eyes*, *Life During Wartime*, and *The Golden* – satisfies you most in retrospect?

LS: None of them. I haven't looked at them since they were written and I have no plans to do so. I don't believe I've been capable of writing a good novel until recently. If pressed for an answer, I guess I'd have to say that *Life During Wartime* is my favourite of the three, in that I understand obliquely that it contains some good work. The stuff I write is dead to me the moment it leaves my desk. I don't keep copies of my books around – I find their presence deeply oppressive. So any judgement I might make on my own work is likely to be bleak.

NG: But your third novel, *The Golden*, is astonishingly intense, surely one of the pinnacles of vampire fiction, and ambitious on other levels also. What inspired the extraordinary architecture of *Castle Banat*? And is a sequel (vampires in Borneo) still a possibility?

LS: A number of readers have said that *Banat* brought Gormenghast to mind. I read Peake when I was a teenager, and it's possible his influence was involved; but I wasn't thinking about his work when writing *The Golden*. I simply like big, intricate things. Especially buildings. The architectural fantasies of Piranesi were the chief source of inspiration for the décor of *Castle Banat*.

*The Golden* was actually a prequel to a novel I intended to write set in Borneo. I was just experimenting with the vampire palette, and I ended up writing a small book. There will be another novel, but it will stretch the concept of sequels a bit. It's going to be a much larger book with a contemporary setting. I don't think there will be any vampires in it – something will have happened to them, and they will have been reduced to the status of folklore; but that legend will play a part in the story. It will focus to an extent on the politics of the region, corruption, et al. The story will incorporate a very large and intricate house in the highlands of Borneo and

treat with the Bree-X scandal, which involved corporations salting gold mines in the interior of the island. I see it as being a fantasy novel without any true fantasy elements.

NG: After a career pause in the late 1990s, you've resumed writing with a succession of powerful new sf and horror novellas – "Crocodile Rock," "Radiant Green Star" and "Eternity and Afterward," the last of which, an odyssey through the illusory yet real Heaven and Hell of a Muscovite nightclub, surely ranks among your greatest works. Do you have further sf or fantasy projects in mind, in addition to The Grand Tour?

LS: I would like to do a science-fantasy novel set in a far future Brazil, focusing on a period of time at the end of and shortly after a very long war. The writing of *Life During Wartime* was extremely frustrating for me. I sold the novel as a science-fiction book with the title of *Psiderweb*. It eventually was published as a mainstream novel. I was forced to do a great deal of rewiring, and as a result the novel is a hybrid, and not at all what I wanted or intended. I'd like to compensate for that by doing something along the lines of the novel I originally planned to write, a book that will reflect whatever development I've managed as a writer. This one, if I write it, will be considerably more fantastical in setting and characterization. But it will essentially deal with the character of soldiers.

I'm also, much to my surprise, working on an epic science-fantasy poem set in a far-future earth. Its working title is "Conduct," from the tenth hexagram of the *I Ching*. I have no designs to publish it, though I may end up making a nice illustrated book out of it. The setting is a quasi-utopian Far East in which the past has been recreated to suit the image of the present created by SUN TAI, a machine mystic who may be the avatar of the age and has reordered the universe on a quantum level...

"...so almost all that should have ever happened had,  
and some things that once were, now  
had never been."

Writing this kind of thing may be a symptom of some mental pathology, but I find it relaxing to do a few lines a day, and my lady friend likes it. Children may also find it amusing.

NG: Of course, you've been producing fine stories outside the speculative genres too (stories still rich in fantastic imagery), several of which have appeared in *Playboy*. Do you find writing "realistic" fiction a different sort of

*"The sci-fi/fantasy market makes up about 7% of the total of books sold, and I suspect that most of those are series books or books that I would for other reasons not care to read."*

*experience? And am I correct in saying that you have "mainstream" novels and novellas on the go?*

LS: I'll be turning in at least one mainstream novel this year, a thriller

of sorts entitled *A Startled Outcry*, which deals with the death of a beautiful woman and various questions of personal identity. I have a more-or-less mainstream short novel entitled *Valentine* that will be published next year. Most of the things I'm intending to work on fall into the categories of either general fiction or mystery fiction. I don't think that science fiction and fantasy will be kind to a writer of my tendencies at this point. The sci-fi/fantasy market makes up about 7% of the total of books sold, and I suspect that most of those are series books or books that I would for other reasons not care to read. The idea of literary science fiction has been gleefully chucked aside, even though the field's most formidable early figures, men like Wells and Orwell, were primarily literary writers. As a consequence, if I want to be read by any sort of audience, I think I may be well served to ply my trade elsewhere.

I enjoy writing genre stories, but I find science fiction and fantasy difficult to maintain at novel length – partly because I have trouble suspending my own disbelief for that long. General or mainstream fiction affords me the opportunity to relegate plot to a less dominant place in the story and focus more on character. In my view, the best stories I've written have been non-genre pieces. I feel much more comfortable dealing with the small moments that configure a non-genre story than I do with the grand moments and exposition required by fantasy and science fiction.

Then, too, the writing of a long science-fiction or fantasy novel involves a great deal of what-if gameplaying, most of which I do not enjoy. The extrapolation of scientific and/or sociological trends is not something I care to engage in on a regular basis. For a while I toyed with the notion of writing an alternate history novel; but when it came down to it, I realized I wasn't at all interested in alternate histories. Our own history is depressing enough. And, further, I could think of no value another such book would have – the thought that it might shed some important light on actual history seems ludicrous. Though I did greatly admire Keith Roberts's work along such lines, it was his writing I loved, not necessarily the invention of the plot and setting. I suppose that those who write alternate history books can answer these questions to their own satisfaction, but I cannot do so to mine. Ideas hold little fascination for me. I'm interested in them only so far as they are embodied by people in the living of their lives. I think I do best when I concern myself with emotional truths and stay the hell away from anything that pretends to be clever.



In Singapore Three, séances are always a risky business. Hell lies too close for comfort, and the gods don't protect fools. So I had deep misgivings when Xu Lu Han said that the best way to promote *Chainsaw Killer* would be to summon a spirit at the wetdisc launch. It would make the disc a hit, he said; put the band on the map and ensure that the Zombies would be in demand in every club in town.

I should have protested at the time, but I didn't. The main reason for this was that I was secretly terrified of Xu Lu. True, I thought he was a moron, but I also considered him to be a dangerous one. This was partly a result of his appearance. Xu Lu was bad enough in a good light and the open air, but in the smoky darkness of the Shanxi Club or Juna's, he was nothing short of horrifying. Someone had once told me that he'd been separated at birth from a twin, and at the time I believed this without question since it seemed to explain such a lot, but I later discovered that he'd had his face razored up in a schoolyard fight, and had gone straight to the local skin sculptor to have it remoulded. He was 13 at the time, from a dirt-poor family, and the results of the remoulding made Xu Lu look as though someone had held him over a flame like a toy soldier, until the flesh had dripped and run. He flaunted his scars in conjunction with a thin mohican that ran like black oil down the centre of his scalp, and a dead-eyed bloodshot stare. He liked to tell people that he'd actually died and been resuscitated, hence the nickname: *Mr Animation*. No one ever called him Xu Lu except me, and then only in the privacy of my own head. It made him a little less like an animé cartoon and a little more like a human being. A little more, but not very much.

It was a shame, really, that I couldn't bring myself to think more highly of *Chainsaw Killer* either, because my younger brother Jhun had written it and it was the first song – indeed, the first thing – that he'd ever managed to achieve. I suppose Jhun and I are polar opposites, in a way. I've always been the studious type (nice retro spectacles, bookpad, NuGap trousers) whereas Jhun was the one to rebel against what he perceived to be maternal strictures. Dad's no longer with us, having skipped up the coast to Hong Kong in search of a fortune. I take after my mum.

Anyway, after the fights and the drug deals (happily nothing more serious than nitromite and soma ore), Jhun's announcement that he was auditioning as a drummer with the Wu Zhiang Zombies seemed like a comparatively positive move. And once he'd actually joined the band, it seemed sensible for me to tag along and keep an eye on him. Heaven knows, I was hardly the archetypal New Century punk, but I did have an exhaustive knowledge of late 20th-century animé and anarchy hard-core house, and this was enough to win me a grudging place on the sidelines of the band. Since the 20th century was now six years away, Jhun tended to regard my knowledge in the light of ancient history. Xu Lu himself didn't like me, but he'd have lost face in acknowledging my presence, and so he simply ignored me. This suited both of us. My brother Jhun ignored me as well, but I

# Mr Animation and the Wu Zhiang Zombies

*Liz Williams*

think he was actually rather pleased to have me hanging around. He was, after all, only 15, whereas both Xu Lu and myself were 20, and Jhun knew I'd back him up if things turned nasty. I might wear NuGap clothes, but I still had a black belt under them, metaphorically speaking. Moreover, I lent Jhun a certain amount of credibility as a result of my musical knowledge, and as the irredeemably straight sibling, I made my brother look almost hip. So by the time that Jhun had got it together to write *Chainsaw Killer*, things had attained a certain degree of equilibrium. And then Xu Lu announced that it was time to hold a séance.

I suppose I'd been expecting something like this for some time. Xu Lu had recently split up from his latest girlfriend, which I think had a lot to do with his mood. He'd started shooting a lot of cendra, and his conversation had that unmistakable amphetamine edge. Even when he was quiet you could hear his teeth; grinding relentlessly on like some engine deep in the bowels of the city. The girlfriend had been a dancer at Juna's; a theoretically lovely girl with a permanent collagenic sneer and eyelid tucks. From a distance, she could have passed as a Westerner, and eventually she'd slept with a sufficiently large number of the US Embassy staff to get a visa for the States. I like to think that Xu Lu, despite his psychotic demeanour, was actually secretly something of a romantic; the break-up seemed to hit him hard. He wrote a number of obsessive songs, in which American bitches featured with worrying prominence. Eventually, however, something inside Xu Lu seemed to snap. He called the band together. I wasn't invited, but I went anyway.

The Wu Zhiang Zombies, Xu Lu announced between grinding molars, were losing their edge. If they wanted to promote *Chainsaw Killer* properly, they were going to have to reclaim that darkness of spirit that had got them



where they were today. And the way to do that, Xu Lu announced without a trace of irony, would be to summon the hungry ghost of Acid Razor; greatest of all anarchy hard-core rockers, who had been decapitated by his own brother in 2003 as a result of a gone-wrong deal. The day on which the séance would be held was the third anniversary of his death.

As soon as Xu Lu made this lunatic proposal, there was a sudden strained silence. I could see Jhun shifting in his seat, trying to look tough, but something was flickering behind his eyes. He was afraid, and I wasn't surprised. The very mention of Hell seemed to bring it closer: shimmering darkly just beyond the edge of vision, as though someone or something was starting to tune in an antique radio.

The bass guitarist, a guy named Ho who rarely spoke, shifted in his seat. "Do you think that's wise, man?"

Xu Lu peeled off his shades and gave Ho an old, cold stare. "Wise? Who the fuck knows what's wise these days? Wisdom's over, man. Dead concept. There are risks, and there are successful risks, is all." He reached into the pocket of his laminated combats and pulled out an ancient digital watch. "We now have 77 hours and falling before Hour Zero. Count down, people, and load up."

With that he stalked out of the room, leaving us with the sick realization that he'd stage-managed the whole thing.

"What do you think I should do?" Jhun asked, as we walked along the waterfront.

I was a bit pleased. It was the first time he'd ever asked my advice and I took it as a sign of increasing maturity. I think I had some idea of helping him walk his own path, so to speak, accompanied by my sage guidance. Some kind of Shaolin trip. With this in mind, I said, "What do *you* think you should do?"

"I dunno," Jhun said helplessly, shifting his narc-O-gum from one cheek to another and booting a dead rat into the oily waters of the dock.

"Well," I said. I was enjoying this, in a condescending kind of way. "Let's approach the problem logically. You can participate, or not participate."

"But if I don't go, Xu Lu will think I'm *h'siao shen*."

I wanted to tell him, *So what the hell, if that imbecile thinks you've got no balls?* But he wasn't old enough to really run with that. "And if you go?" I asked.

Jhun rolled a nervy eye in my direction. "Something might happen?" he ventured.

"Something might indeed happen. And what do you think that something might be?"

"Dunno," Jhun echoed. "The séance might – well, it might *work*."

Off the side of the wharf, something surfaced for a moment, then plunged, leaving a spreading coil of ripples. There were few fish in the city's polluted harbour.

"That," I told him, "is a distinct possibility." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew what I had to do. A vista opened up before me, comprised of new and dangerous possibilities. I saw the chance to get Jhun out from under Xu Lu's thumb once and for all and a long

way down in my subconscious, I also glimpsed the opportunity to revenge myself for all Xu Lu's slights and sneering. We would indeed be conjuring a spirit, but not Acid Razor. I had something rather different in mind.

"I think," I said, "that maybe you should go to the séance. Think of it as a rite of passage. A test."

Jhun thought about this laboriously for a few minutes and then he nodded. We looked at one another in the half-light, and then he reached out and gave me a sort of punch on the arm. It wasn't much, from your brother, but it was enough.

I've never been sure, though, whether it really was my persuasion that made Jhun go to the séance. He was too scared of jeopardizing his burgeoning rock reputation, and too mortified to countenance Xu Lu's scorn, not to go. And I went with him, of course. I couldn't let him go on his own. Neither of us said anything to mum. We told her we were meeting my friends in the park, for football. It sounded healthy, and she'd never have believed it if I'd told her Jhun had a study evening.

On the evening of the seventh anniversary of Acid Razor's death, Jhun and I headed for the Shanxi Club. Xu Lu wanted to hold the séance before the main performance, in order to summon the required dark energies, but I could hear the band rehearsing as we turned the corner into Shanxi Road. It was a pulsing undercurrent of sound, like the grinding of vast distant teeth. It seemed to travel along the pavement and strike lightning up the spine. Jhun turned to me and for the first time in my life I saw a kind of teary pride in his eyes. He said, "Jesus, they're shit-good, aren't they?"

The band had something, I had to admit. Quite what, remained to be seen.

When Jhun walked through the door, Xu Lu got up from his chair and prowled across the room. "What's he doing here?" he snarled, giving me a baleful look.

Anticipation is the forefront of attack. I said quickly, "You're familiar with this, I'm sure?" I took Wan Sung's *History of Demonology in Ancient China* out of my pocket and thrust it under his nose. "It's all about séances," I said.

Xu Lu gazed at it with the hauteur of a visiting scholar and muttered, "Yeah, I've seen it."

"As I expected," I replied. "And I'm sure you're also familiar with the chapter on the Summoning of Presences?"

Without wasting any more time, and obviously avoiding the confession that he couldn't remember how to read, Xu Lu snapped, "Like the back of my fucking hand. Explain it to these assholes while I get another drink."

So I did, though not without misgivings which I firmly suppressed. I'm good at explaining things. I did so succinctly and clearly, and by the time Xu Lu returned with a bottle of Scotch, we were all considerably wiser as to the proper procedure of séances.

"I've been telling them that you, naturally, will assume the role of the Summoner," I told him. "Everyone else must generate the necessary dark energies through the reversal of *ch'i*." Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. "Reverse breathing. Concentration on the centre. Stillness."

"Blood."

"What?"

"Don't forget blood," Xu Lu grinned, displaying sharp filed teeth. "Did you tell 'em about the sacrifice?"

"One step at a time," I said. *Fuck*, I thought, *what is he planning now?*

"Sacrifice?" said Ho, echoing my own disquiet. "You didn't say anything about a sacrifice."

As if on cue, a small moon-faced girl stepped through the door of the basement and stood gazing at us solemnly. She couldn't have been more than six; presumably the average age of the city's virgins. Jhun shot me a horrified glance. Ho's mouth hung open. Principles engaged in a fleeting struggle with my fear of Xu Lu and rather to my surprise, principles won. I said, very quietly, "Xu Lu, just what did you have in mind, precisely?"

Xu Lu's shark's smile widened. The little girl said, uncertainly, "I brought your sweets. My brother says you can give him the money tomorrow." With that, she handed over a small package, turned, and ran back out through the door. I've never been so relieved to see anyone leave. Xu Lu opened the package and tipped a half twist of soma ore onto his palm.

"My runner," he explained, "thinks it's candy." He caught sight of our expressions. "Fuck's sake, you guys. I was kidding about the sacrifice." He fished in his greasy rucksack and extracted a very dead black hen that bore all the hallmarks of roadkill. "Thought we'd use this. Make it look good, you know?" And then he stepped across to me, put his unsavoury face very close to mine, and said in a voice that was almost no voice at all, "So no more shit from you, Professor, okay?"

"Fine with me," I said hastily. I was so pleased that infanticide apparently wasn't on the agenda after all that I'd have agreed to anything at that point. And my plan was still intact. Now that the rest of the band was clued up (and I was pretty sure that Xu Lu had been listening in on my explanation of the séance) I could take a back seat while someone else did the driving. If I had any thoughts of the vehicle veering out of control, I stuffed them down the disposal shaft of my mind.

The idea was that the band would hold the séance at the end of their first set, if one can dignify it with such a term. Xu Lu had ideas about build-up and climax that, even if he did overdo the sexual subtext, were actually sound enough. Somewhere in the course of his benighted life, he'd managed to acquire a sense of theatre. I was given a kind of production role: while the band played, I would be waiting in the wings with the hen (now residing in the bar's fridge) and various other occult accoutrements. Thinking that if we were going to do this at all, we might as well do it properly, I analysed the feng shui of the Shanxi Club to my own satisfaction and sorted out some of the darker aspects. Surreptitiously, I placed *bag gua* mirrors opposite the door and the stage, to reflect any negative ch'i. No one would notice them, and it didn't really matter if they did.

Jhun came back late in the afternoon holding a red, heavy piece of material that looked suspiciously like my mum's festive tablecloth.

"Xu Lu says you're to wear it. He says it'll look good," my brother explained, somewhat sheepishly. I opened my mouth to argue, then saw the pleading look on his face. If Xu Lu had asked for it, then it had better be done. This was worse than a wedding. I gritted my teeth, contemplating that after the séance, once I'd made Xu Lu look suitably foolish, I could work on diminishing his influence over my brother. If the plan worked, that shouldn't be too difficult. After all, Xu Lu's idea of raising the ghost of Acid Razor literally did not have a hope in Hell, whereas my idea – well, we'd see.

It wasn't a very grandiose plan; no summoning of the Eternal Lords of Night or anything. After all, I was prepared to take a risk, but I wasn't entirely stupid. No, my idea was simply to conjure up a *Ti Hsi*, which according to the book of Demonology is a singularly gruesome apparition that makes the alien in *Predator* look like Jennifer Lopez. It is, however, completely harmless. It would caper about for a few minutes before dissolving in the harsh air of the real world, Xu Lu would wet himself, and my brother would lose all respect for him. Such was my plan.

On the day of the disc launch, I duly went down to the nearest remedy maker and purchased a few essential items. I spent the rest of the day writing a respectable essay on the influence of American cartoons on Japanese media, had my tea, and then headed back to the club. Jhun was already there rehearsing, if you can call it that.

The Shanxi Club was, not surprisingly, packed to the doors. The cream of the city's music industry (or scum, if you prefer) always flocked to disc launches, lured by the prospect of free drugs and alcohol. Xu Lu had hired a few exotic dancers. The management of Hiroshima Records were there in force, which surprised me somewhat. I hadn't thought that the Zombies would attract that kind of executive interest. I wrapped the tablecloth on top of my clothes, retrieved the dead hen, lit the incense burner and waited while the performance got under way.

I'd heard the band before, of course, but never at such volume, or from such short range. They were deafening, and I could barely see a thing through the smoke from the incense burner, combined with the drift of dope from the front of the audience. Singapore Three's music press were clearly determined to party hard. At last the music ground to a crashing halt and I looked up in time to see Xu Lu beckoning furiously. I leaped onto the stage, the red cloth trailing about my ankles, and held the hen aloft by its limp wings. I thought I looked ridiculous, but I later learned that what with all the smoke and the flashing lights, my appearance was rather startling.

Xu Lu emitted a roar and stabbed himself in the face. I nearly dropped the hen. He'd done it with a thing like a huge acupuncture needle, and it went right through one cheek and out the other. His eyes rolled back in his head. Blood poured down his neck. He'd have made H. R. Giger proud.

I was paralysed. Not for the first time, it occurred to me to wonder what he was on. Xu Lu bawled something, but I couldn't understand him. At first I thought he was miming, and then I realized the truth: I just couldn't hear

him through the ringing in my ears. It might have been, "Give me the hen!" so I threw it at him. Xu Lu took a mighty bite, greatly impeded by the bolt through his face, and wrenched off the hen's head with sharp teeth. Even the band was watching him with unmitigated horror. I wondered whether he would in fact be scared by the apparition, or whether he'd just embrace it like a brother. He hurled both bits of hen at his feet, and gestured. I raised the incantation paper and began reading off the litany, still unable to hear what I was saying. I could barely see, either, and it occurred to me later that I might very well have mispronounced something crucial: Cantonese is, after all, a tonal tongue. It would account for what happened next.

Incantations spattered behind me like sparks from a fire cracker. Xu Lu turned. An immense crack was opening up beyond the stage, over the heads of the audience. I could see straight through it, to a place where a hundred heads of demons turned and gaped. I could see something that looked like a bar, and a stage. It was an infernal mirror-image of the Shanxi Club. Something leaped down from the stage and bounded through the crack, its tail lashing. I caught a glimpse of crimson fireball eyes, a black leather outfit, and long streaming hair. It seized Xu Lu, threw him over its shoulder, and sprang back through the crack, which closed. There was a sudden surge for the door as the audience recollected its sense of survival, panicked and fled. Xu Lu was gone.

Once the shock of this unexpected event had worn off, I was more than pleased. The séance, wrongly performed and with surprising results, had nevertheless achieved the effect I had hoped for. Xu Lu was off the scene, and my brother was so staggered by my hitherto unsuspected occult bravado that all the respect that had gone to Xu Lu now came to me. I abused it thoroughly, demanding constant cups of tea and insisting that Jhun do his homework every day.

All was rosy, until we got a letter from Hiroshima Records' lawyers, threatening to sue. I was being held responsible for the disappearance of the band's lead singer, and as such, liable for contractual fees and projected royalties. The sums were astounding. Even if mum sold the flat and I went into servitude for the rest of my life, we'd never pay it off. I could go to jail, but there was mum and Jhun to think of and anyway, I didn't want my promising future wrecked by a prison sentence. There was nothing for it. I would have to go to Hell, and get Xu Lu back.

To say that I was not looking forward to this is putting it mildly. I'd certainly proved to everyone's satisfaction that it was possible to open a gate between Hell and the world, but I'd never had any intention of actually going there, living or dead. I spent three days spending a fortune on charms and remedies, and then returned to the now-deserted Shanxi Club. Jhun went with me, which alternatively terrified me in case anything happened to him, and made me proud.

I stood on the stage; Jhun lit the burner and held it up with shaking hands, and I once more recited the ritual. And the gate began to open. Bedecked with charms, and

gathering the tatters of my nerves, I ran to the front of the stage and swan-dived through the crack in the air.

I landed heavily on a slimy floor. The place smelled strange and unpleasant, like blood and sour breath. I hauled myself to my feet and looked about me. I had been right. This was the Hellish equivalent of the Shanxi Club. There wasn't a lot to choose between the two. No one was around, but a shaft of dusty sunlight filtered through the cracks in a blind. I went over and peered cautiously through.

On Earth, the club was at the top of a hill; so, too, in Hell. I could see all the way down the road, past the torn facades of apparently deserted shop fronts, to where an immense metal spike, its sides gleaming, reared into a boiling crimson sky. Looking in the other direction, I saw more menacing spires, and a huge building shaped like a ziggurat, its summit lost in clouds. Then I let the blind fall, and bolted for the illusory sanctuary of the bar. Someone was coming.

Whoever it was moved swiftly, footsteps reverberating heavily from the floorboards. Someone large, then, and decisive. I cowered beneath the bar, hoping they'd go away. They did not. The footsteps stopped and I hear something snuffling, wetly. Then there was a scrabbling surge of movement, and a shape launched itself around the corner of the bar towards my throat.

The next few moments were confused. I had a shocking image of a great toothed maw, and long clawed fingers. Something rattled and the thing was hauled abruptly back.

"Stop it!" someone roared. And then... "Oh!"

I had been spotted.

"A human!" someone hissed. "Fresh meat for *you*, then, isn't it?"

The creature reared above me onto its hind legs, and snarled. I saw hot yellow eyes, a snaking tail. It was a dog spirit, leashed by a chain around its neck.

"Food!" it bawled, in a slavering kind of voice. Someone reached round, grabbed me by the collar and hauled me up. I looked into a gaze filled with dull, demonic malevolence: the creature's handler.

"You! Into the yard, dog meat!"

"I only came to find my friend!"

"Dog meat, I said!" the demon howled.

"Is that what you did with Xu Lu?" I wailed. The first, stupid thought in my head was that now we'd never pay off the record company. My second was that if I died in Hell, where would my soul go? Clearly, I was about to find out. But then I was abruptly released.

"Xu Lu?" The demon, still clutching the dog spirit's leash, stepped back a pace. "You one of his mates, then?"

A wrong answer could cost me – well, anything was better than dog food. "Yes," I lied.

"You'd better come and see Mr Lu, then," the demon muttered. "Come with me."

Mr Lu? How long had he been here? I followed the demon through a maze of passages, each one more foul-smelling than the last. Eventually we came to a door, on which the demon knocked.

"Go away! I told you I didn't want to be disturbed!"

I knew that voice, anyway.

"Friend of yours to see you, Mr Lu."

"Fuck off!"

"Oh, Xu, why don't you see who it is? Hmm, sweetie?"

That wasn't a voice, it was a purr. The demon shoved me through the door, into a large room swathed with black drapes. Xu Lu was sprawled on a food-stained bed, in the company of the thing with the tail and the teeth that had carried him off in the first place. I have to say, she was even more terrifying on second glance. She gave me the shakes, and not only with terror. It was interesting to see that bondage fashions had penetrated into Hell. Come to think of it, this was probably where they'd originated.

"Oh," Xu said sourly. "It's you."

"I've come to take you home," I announced, in a voice that even to myself sounded both high and pompous.

"Don't tell me you missed me," Xu Lu grinned.

"Hardly. But we owe Hiroshima Records if you don't come back." The truth will out, they say.

Xu Lu threw back his head and laughed. "That so? Wear it, then. I'm not coming." He looked at the female demon, and his face changed. If he hadn't been so hideous, I might have called it sweet. I'd been right in supposing him a secret romantic. And the demon simpered back, and gave him a little wave with her taloned fingers. It was nauseating.

"So you can sod off, then, can't you?" Xu snarled.

"Xu..." The demoness drew a claw down his nose. "You know you can only stay if someone returns to Earth in your

place. And you know that demons aren't allowed to live in mortal realms. So what are we going to do, darling?"

There was a long, charged silence. I don't know what temporary bond – perhaps one born of mutual desperation – caused both Xu and I to look at one another, and then at the only non-demon in the room. The dog spirit stood, still on its hind legs, panting and drooling, and looking curiously hopeful in that witless way that dogs of all descriptions somehow manage to do.

So that was that, really. Xu's girlfriend sent me back, and the dog spirit came too. I took it along to the record company's offices, next day. There was no more talk of costs. Jhun's admiration of his intrepid brother went up by several notches. The rest of the band kept coming around – I think the dog spirit impressed them. They started talking about doing another wetdisc, perhaps with a more trip-hop ambience: Ho alluded delicately to "creative differences" with his erstwhile band member, but if they didn't get it together I promised to loan them the dog spirit. It already possessed primitive powers of speech and perhaps, I thought, we could even teach it to sing. After all, it couldn't be any worse than Mr Animation.

Liz Williams's first novel is due out very soon from Bantam Books in the USA. Her previous stories in this magazine were "A Child of the Dead" (issue 123), "The Unthinkables" (issue 151), "Dog Years" (issue 152), "Adventures in the Ghost Trade" (issue 154) and "The Blood Thieves" (issue 168). She lives in Brighton and has travelled widely.

# HEAD SHOTS

short stories by  
Keith Brooke

## Head Shots – a collection of short stories

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from the foreword by Eric Brown

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## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Those US cyberbullies Fandom Inc. – owners of the commercial Fandom.com web site, perpetrators of untruths about having successfully trademarked the word “fandom,” and litigious harassers of innocently named sf fan sites like Fandom.tv – went into terminal decline in March. All over the world, sympathetic sf pundits commented: “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.”

## REMEMBER THOR FIVE!

**R. Chetwynd-Hayes** (1919-2001), British supernatural fiction writer and anthologist, died of bronchial pneumonia on 20 March. He was 81. In 1989 he had been presented with Life Achievement Awards by both the British Fantasy Society and the Horror Writers of America.

**Daniel Counihan** (1917-2001), journalist, radio reporter 1940s-1970s, and author of the children's fantasy *Unicorn Magic* (1953), died on 25 March. His daughters Liz and Deirdre are editor and art editor of the Brighton-based sf/fantasy/gothic magazine *Scheherazade*.

**Peter Firmin**, the artist who worked with Oliver Postgate on *Noggin the Nog*, *The Clangers*, *Bagpuss* et al, supports a charity aimed at opening the disused Canterbury-Whitstable railway line as a footpath. For a £10 (minimum) donation he'll do you a quick autographed sketch of your favourite Firmin/Postgate character. Cheques to Crab and Winkle Line Trust, c/o *The Oldie*, 45-46 Poland St, London, W1F 7NA.

**David Redd**, *Interzone* author, was in two successive March outbreaks of TV's *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* quiz show. David Pringle reported: “He went away with £16,000 – not bad, but we'd all kind of hoped for bet-

ter from a great sf mind.” Hardly fair to afflict such a mind with numbing questions about tennis players.

**Michael Swanwick** is crushed: “My chances of someday being recognized as Philadelphia's leading science fiction writer were bitterly dashed when Samuel R. Delany accepted a post at Temple University, where he will be teaching three days a week. Now the best I can hope for is that someday I will be Philadelphia's leading science fiction writer on Thursdays, Fridays, and weekends.”

**J. R. R. Tolkien** placed seventh (just below Andy Warhol, just above Frank Sinatra) in a Forbes “cemetery rich list” of stupendous posthumous earners, with takings of £4.8 million in 2000. Dr Seuss and Charles Schulz are doing rather better, at fourth and second place respectively: “Books do not pay, unless you write for children.” (*Times*, 14 March)

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**The James Tiptree Award** went to *Wild Life* by Molly Gloss.

**Web Hugo.** Time to polish up your sf web site. The 2002 World SF Convention – ConJosé in San José, California – is exercising the traditional privilege of adding an extra, one-off Hugo award category: Best Web Site.

**The Man Who Counts.** Our weirdness correspondent is bemused by a web site that's campaigning to have Britain apologize for all colonial atrocities since 1560. Protestors are urged to e-mail “the one man who can change everything. [...] What one man? Who can have so much power and influence at his fingertips? Tony Blair? Nope. / J. Michael Straczynski. Creator of *Babylon 5*. Current writer on *The Amazing Spider-Man*. / Beyond his foul, foul, foul, foul decision to further fuck up the origins of Spider-Man, we hold J. Michael Straczynski responsible for not properly wielding his influence over the science fiction and fantasy communities of the UK, which a glance at any of the last 15 pages of any copy of *The Fortean Times* will show to be absolute. He's a man in power! He should do something!” Dearie me.

**Demeritus.** SFWA's naming of Robert Sheckley as their 2001 “Author Emeritus” caused some stir, since this honour is perceived as a consolation prize for authors unworthy of SFWA Grand Master status. Editor David G. Hartwell and others feel Sheckley deserves Grand Masterhood; John Clute forcibly pointed that “emeritus” (retired, clapped out, now an honorary

author only) is an insult to any still working writer.

**Nebulas.** The shortlisted novels: *Darwin's Radio*, Greg Bear; *A Civil Campaign*, Lois McMaster Bujold; *Midnight Robber*, Nalo Hopkinson; *Crescent City Rhapsody*, Kathleen Ann Goonan; *Infinity Beach*, Jack McDevitt; *Forests of the Heart*, Charles de Lint.

**Statistics Corner.** It is of great importance to the future of sf conventions that by the year 2010 – according to Dr Vernon Coleman's extrapolation from current figures in *Strange But True* (Blue Books) – “one out of every three people will be an Elvis impersonator.”

**Banking on SF.** In Australia, the Queen has been booted from the \$5 note in favour of an sf writer: Catherine Helen Spence, described by reporter Yvonne Rousseau as “not only a protector of the orphan and the South-Australian poor, but also the author of the splendid sf novel *Handfasted* (1879: first published, 1984) and of the lesser *A Week in the Future* (1888).”

**Small Press.** *Light's List 2001*: brief listings of 1450+ small press mags. 16th ed; worldwide coverage; English-language publications only. £2 from John Light, 37 The Meadows, Berwick upon Tweed, TD15 1NY. Meanwhile *Big Engine* found that advance copies of its first book (a Langford reissue, hurrah) were wrongly trimmed, reducing the engine logo atop the cover to a bare set of wheels. We must at all costs resist the nickname Big Bogey.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of the Uncensored.* “The Time Lord stopped, though horror was fisting his soul...” (Mick Lewis, *Dr Who: Rags*, 2001) “And if she sat still she imagined she could feel meat growing, shoving up beneath her boyish nipples.” (Joe Haldeman, *Worlds*, 1981) *Dept of Experimental Physics.* “His quick-thinking brain told him that, with a slight adjustment of his atomic ‘sprayer,’ and used in the close proximity of the water, which had great density, judging by its appearance, he stood a chance of turning the atoms making up Peters, Van and the rest, into a genuine atomic cloud. If that cloud rose to the surface of the hole, and his sprayer still operated, he should be able, with a final shot into the centre of the cloud, reverse the process because of the absence of water, and reconstitute his friends into their normal shapes. Their atoms, in other words, would be drawn together again to make them into human beings.” (Terence Haile, *Galaxies Ahead*, Digit 1963) “What is this?” he yelled defiantly at the strange vessel. “How dare you attack someone who is over a million years old?” (*Ibid.*)

Previously in Evelyn's Media Column (IZ 165), the new enhanced role of young women as heroes in fantastic television was examined, and in the process several sideswipes were delivered to richly deserving targets. Now read on.

So, we have the 100mhz Sony Wega 28" wide screen digital television linked into the hi-fi, the brand new DVD player, the slightly more elderly VHS video player, and the digital feed along with the telephone from the local cable company; now we're kitted out for anything the 21st-century entertainment industry can throw at us. So what is there to watch?

At first glance, precious little. The basic digital package doesn't include Sky One, so we can't even watch *Star Trek* in its various incarnations while we think about what extra packages to subscribe to. In fact, the terrestrial channels have become so mind-numbingly dull that BBC2 have had to resort to broadcasting world championship snooker at prime time in the evenings rather than allow us to watch anything we actually want to see – *Buffy* is suspended between halves of a two-parter, *Farscape* has disappeared up its own helium-expelling orifice, and even the last series of *Star Trek: Voyager*, which has proved so unenticing as to have been unobserved thus far in this household, is withheld while the wizards wave their wands and whack the white in a whirl of green baize and coloured potting – or was that *Gardener's World*? Now, don't take this the wrong way. During an unusually protracted but low-level illness recently, the snooker has provided a soothing distraction from the paucity of real entertainment on the television.

But it becomes plain fairly soon that the "free" digital box comes at the price of having to purchase the extra services that actually make it worth having. So first, we sign up for one package that allows us to watch E4, the new purportedly "yoof" channel from Channel 4, with its run of the new *Ally McBeal* series.

Now, as *Ally McBeal* is a mainstream comedy drama series, it might not be thought to be strictly within the remit of this column. However, it is exactly as much a part of the fantasy genre as 1984 is science fiction. David E. Kelley's one joke, that *Ally*'s fantasy world, while unremittably strange, is actually less bizarre than the real world she inhabits, permits so many wonderful permutations that the invention is only beginning to slacken now after three series. And what is Kelley doing about it? First off, he has recruited two movie stars, Robert Downey Jr. and Anne Heche, as new character interest. Second, he has downplayed the grotesque fantasies. So what we now have are much more naked and harrowing examinations of human emo-

## The Box Files of Arthur C. Clarke

Evelyn Lewes

tions and motivations.

John Cage, "the biscuit," falls in love with a client whom he has successfully defended, a young woman with Tourette's Syndrome who has apparently tried to run over her boyfriend. This is Anne Heche, and she is not only very attractive, but wonderfully affecting in the role. Where Cage has various strategies for dealing with his own tendency to stutter, her Tourette's Syndrome means she has the unfortunate habit of whooping, or saying any word that is foremost in her mind uncontrollably, and each echoes the other's verbal tics unintentionally so that their interplay becomes an actorly tour-de-force and a wonder to behold. But instead of playing this for laughs, Kelley goes against type as usual and depicts these two people in a deeply distressing emotional bind made only more intense by their individual strangenesses. Conversely, *Ally* herself has finally found the perfect man, played by the equally attractive Robert Downey Jr., and her bizarre fantasies have receded in the face of her finally finding the love of her life – except he has a child by a previous marriage, and his ex-wife wants to get back together for the sake of the child. So he goes back to Chicago, and *Ally* begins to have odd moments again, most noticeably where she has a conversation about contraception with a nun on an aeroplane, and then opens the door in mid-air and is sucked out.

I hold this particular series up as an exemplum: much of the story-telling is compellingly visual; I simply can't stand in the kitchen and listen-while-cooking when it is on. It is also, courtesy of its actors and the camera direction, one of the most beautiful shows on television to look at. And the way the musical sound track is used to comment on the

action is close to genius as well, although familiar songs do sometimes become slightly mangled to suit the current story line.

An unexpected bonus of paying out for E4 was finding repeats of *Smack the Pony*. I missed this first time round, but the better half was aware of it. This is bizarre and surreal comedy from three masterful comedians who all happen to be women and who manage an amazing amount of sexual commentary without ever becoming lewd or lascivious (oh, all right, sometimes they are lascivious, but only in a blindingly funny way). They are ably supported by a couple of young men, who do an astonishing job of keeping their dignity while the feminine frenzy foams, and the stunningly gorgeous Sarah Alexander, a welcome returnee after her performance as the only good thing in Grant Naylor's sci-fi comedy for Sky One last year, *The Strangers*, a multi-part series that managed to stretch a single half-hour-comedy-episode's-worth of humour over a full series.

One of the reasons for getting a widescreen television was to be able to watch widescreen movies without the sides cut off. Well, here's a disappointment. While all the terrestrial channels broadcast in widescreen where they can, only one Sky movie channel does, leading to the peculiar situation of watching last year's *Buffy* on BBC2 in widescreen on Thursday evenings followed by this year's *Buffy* on Sky One on Friday with the edges chopped off. Anyway, we signed up for Sky Premier thinking it was a bit expensive but there was a film we wanted to watch, and were at first pleasantly surprised to find for our money we got twelve channels – Sky Premier 1-4 and Sky Premier Widescreen (SPW), Sky Moviemax 1-5, and Sky Movies 1&2 – then disappointed to find that, despite being digital, they were all 4:3 (the original television proportions) except SPW. As SPW only transmits in the evenings, most of the time we are stuck with the old format of picture, or we can distort it or crop it ourselves to fit the screen.

Now call me a whitebellied whingeing wombat if you like, but we didn't pay all that money for a spiffy state-of-the-art telly to watch stuff in the old format – but then after a while it ceases to matter, when you realize that anyway they are just showing the same old movies over and over. We watched *Zorro* and *Entrapment* on the widescreen premieres and were suitably impressed (with the visuals – *Zorro* is appallingly trite, a series of cartoon/pulp set pieces with little in the way of characterization to keep the interest, and *Entrapment* is a eyeball-ravishing tour-de-force with again little to engage the mind apart from wondering how any producer could

have seriously supported the gloriously implausible love affair at its centre). We still haven't been able to sit still all the way through *The Avengers*, widescreen or no.

As a little experiment, we have been excavating old videotapes from the archives and watching them with friends late on Friday after the pubs shut. They do look better on the new TV, but still the wrong proportions. Recently, we have chuckled through *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and been suitably gob-smacked by the backdrops, and, surprise surprise, by the central moral conundrum of *Conquest of Space*. So it came as something of a relief to find that there was finally something worthy of my attention on the widescreen channel: the widescreen premiere of all four *Star Wars* movies.

Despite renumbering the original *Star Wars* movie to make it number four in the sequence, they were still shown in age order, with the most recent, episode one, *The Phantom Menace*, shown last and the renumbered part four, *A New Beginning*, shown first. And the sequence was justified. I loved the first *Star Wars* movie. Even while recognizing it was little more than back-to-back clichés, I loved the chutzpah, the simple glory of finally seeing this stuff done properly. Who can forget that towering moment in the Dominion Cinema in Tottenham Court Road with its quadraphonic sound system when for the first time the camera panned down from the intergalactic story-so-far script, the princess's ship flew by overhead, and, as the star cruiser followed it and its menacing drone throbbed suddenly from the speakers all around, the entire audience instinctively ducked?

Attempting to relive this moment in miniature in a corner of my own living room and failing, my disappointment was given some focus as, from the depths of the sofa, from behind the *Radio Times*, the voice of better half spake and sayeth unto me,

"They all look like toys."

Of course they do. That's what they are. But robbed of the theatrical presence of a huge cinema, 2,000 like-minded people surrounding me, and that mind-numbing no-expense spared terrifying throb, that's *all* they were. Finding that even our new state-of-the-art telly is not wide enough, so that we still have to watch these films letterboxed was also a blow. And then poor Peter Cushing comes on and delivers lines that remind me of nothing so much as Bela Lugosi in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* the night before, and the disenchantment was complete. It is a cruel irony that a film that did so much for Alec Guinness should contain such a feeble sputter from Cushing.

When they originally appeared, I went to see *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* on release. The third one, *Planet of*

the Teddy Bears or some such drek, I only went to see along with the other two to please an eight-year-old. I refused to pay money to see *Phantom Menace*, and when it finally rolled up on the nice new wide screen, I felt justified. All that I remember is a pod-race that is only rivalled by the chariot race in *Ben-Hur* for its sheer silliness – and if the best the Force can offer is the ability to fly faster in a chariot race, or fly an X-wing along a trench, or lift an X-wing out of a swamp, then give me the flawed and misplaced transcendence of *Conquest of Space* over it any time. I retain more vivid images and more sympathy for the characters and their predicaments from that movie than from all four *Star Wars* films put together.

While we are considering the awesome silliness of the *Star Wars* movies, and while I realize that the re-use of clichés demands that the empire's "enemy" troops must resemble the Wehrmacht in their field-grey uniforms, and that Darth Vader and his stormtroopers resemble the SS and the Gestapo (with the nice inversion that the stormtroopers wear all white, not all black), there are two clichés that are beyond the realms of believability, and must be challenged. First, the extraneous guards: why, in many ultra-secure fictional institutions (be they space station, desolate planet, undersea installation, you name it), is it deemed necessary to have guards armed with sub-machine guns or their ilk stationed at every door and catwalk? And second, the hungry monsters: in the apparent absence of any similar food-stuffs, what do monsters eat when the hero escapes them? Examples abound in the *Star Wars* movies; they are just there for effect, sure, but they are also a significant mark of the disregard that the producers of these dramas have for the intelligence of their audiences.

The "Previously..." moment at the head of this article is there to demonstrate how perplexing such things can be if you've not seen a programme before. Not to be confused with "Last time..." moments, where high spots from the preceding episode are rerun, "Previously..." moments imply at least three things: that the makers think an episode won't make sense without this information; that the audience might not be able to remember these connections for itself; and that, in this age of instant repeats, it is necessary to establish where exactly in the run we are at this given moment. Strange that, even as we are expected to master ever more complex equipment to view these shows – we have five remote controls on the coffee table, and I don't know what half the buttons do – we are being treated as incapable of remembering events from previous episodes for ourselves.

Of course, this is not necessarily

dumbing down; it can be short-hand keying-in to a particular mood. But, having subscribed to yet another digital package in order to access *The Sci-Fi Channel*, late-night surfing turned up something called *Time and Again*. The opening narrative sets up the situation for us – a man who was accidentally pushed under a subway train has had his brain transplanted into an enhanced body, but the technology is so highly secret that he's not allowed to tell the wife and daughter he is devoted to that he has survived – but he keeps encountering them. This is enough to follow the rather lame episode it introduced, but, lo, a "Previously..." moment was also deemed necessary, and its equal ineptitude is adequately revealed by its opening phrase, "Before..."

The dumbing down of modern television is nowhere better summarized than in the documentaries that are being produced. A recent programme on Channel 4 gave us five minutes of information about charred scrolls that had been discovered under the lava at Pompeii, and 45 minutes of padding and digression. Similarly, in no less than three 50-minute documentaries called something like *Voyage to Mars*, very small pieces of information were padded with all kinds of fatuous longueurs, and the total factual information was probably in the region of ten minutes for the three programmes. And so memorable were these facts that the only abiding information that I took away from these programmes was gathered visually. Sir Arthur C. Clarke was shown several times on the verandah of his home in Sri Lanka talking of the technical problems that missions to Mars might encounter, but near the end of the series he was filmed in his study/office, and there we were privileged to see that one of the great scientific engineering innovators of our age, the man who dreamed up geostationary orbits, satellite television, and the space elevator, was using a couple of old box files to raise his computer monitor to a suitable height. Well done, Arthur. Low-tech solutions are obviously best. Now, does anyone want to buy a slightly used digital widescreen TV...

Evelyn Lewes

Next time in Evelyn's Evaluations – having established contact with The Sci-Fi Channel and under the sting of Ben Jeapes's comments in the letter column last month, a more considered evaluation of *Farscape* will be attempted. Also, as by some serendipitous means the complete run of *Babylon 5* began the day after we got the connection, J. Michael Straczynski's much touted "story ark" will be given the Lewes Look. On a lighter note, new DVD releases of *Galaxy Quest* and *Dangermouse* will be tittered over. Be seeing you...



# **RARE** *as a* **ROCKET**

**D**ad says it's rude to stare, but the first time I saw Mr Zephat I couldn't help it.

We were purging biomutes in the garden when Mr Zephat looked over the fence. He glanced up at our sky, a favourite creation of mine – Saturn from a viewpoint along the Cassini Gap between the Rings, a great rainbow arch of false colour – then asked Dad if he could borrow the enzyme filter when we were through. Dad said, "Yes, of course." They got to talking about how the biomutes were sneaking faster through our lawn domes – they reckoned the new strains were viral-sized and snuck through bacteriamesh several grades of nanometre too big – when I realized that Mr Zephat had no link-nodes.

Now look: I'm as liberal as any girl around here (Dad always says, "Even clones have a right to spare organs"), but to see a man (a Citizen!) with no silvery nubbles beneath his ear lobes is as rare as a rocket, as the old saying goes. I kept my head down, fiddled with the bee circuitry in the border hive, and peeked up at our neighbour. Nope: no link-nodes. His skin was pale, despite the UV, and a fine trace of veins ran from his flattened nose across to his hollowed-out cheeks; they reminded me of the new river-systems on Mars (I was doing a project on them, to be in on Seconday).

**Nigel Brown**





When we were alone I asked Dad about it. He explained that not all folks were linked, even in our privileged society. When I pointed out that it was the Law of '97, he got cross and I had to go down to my room to finish the project as it was already Firstday.

The Gauchers moved in about a week later. That was in the house on the other side; we were between them and Mr Zephat. Dad ran a cross-check on the link. He says you can't be too careful about new neighbours, especially after what happened to Mrs Digby's spare husband, running off with Mum like that.

Dad soon ran into the "wall of silence" that usually means one of their number has been wiped for antisocial behaviour. Dad got excited; tried to pull strings – failed, then got sulky and cranked whenever a Gaucher passed our front door. I met their son Dayv on the local link. Being both 18, we'd been assigned the same Citizenship Tutor, though Dayv was coming up to his Citizenship Finals, and when we discovered we lived next door he came round and we had sex till Dad said it was late and Dayv had to go home.

I told Dayv about the nodeless state of our neighbour and he didn't believe me; he said Mr Zephat was definitely risking asset-strip unless he was in one of the exempt categories – Dayv was ahead of me in Web-link Law, though I beat him flat in Exo-history. He spent most of his time worrying about his Citizenship Thesis – he hadn't even found a subject yet.

That worried me, too. Dayv needed a thesis to get his Citizenship. You see, he'd promised me a room in his own house, once his Citizen's status gave him entitlement to a private residential dome.

I didn't tell Dad. I knew what he'd say, so why ask for trouble?

Soon after, Dayv and I were sitting under our Dome on a starry day, waiting for my neighbour to make an appearance. We couldn't link him of course: he had no nodes. I wondered about that – what would it be like to live in a world cut off from people, information, help when you needed it? No Guardian Angel to look after you? I suspected it would be lonely – maybe dangerous. Mr Zephat had enjoyed speaking to Dad, though I could tell that Dad was just being polite. Maybe Mr Zephat would speak to us if we saw him.

After a few hours of just sitting on the lawn while we watched several shows, Dayv muttering about the thesis he hadn't done yet, I called up my file to work on my next project – the Mystery of the Missing Pluto. Dayv surfed aimlessly through sites denied me as he was two months older... then I felt a sharp dig in my ribs: a physical jab.

I shut down the file and focused on the garden again. Mr Zephat was busy on the other side of the fence. He was bending over, maybe working on his border bee units, then standing up straight, but sideways, so we had a good view of his neck. I could see from Dayv's face that he'd spotted the wrinkled but bare skin beneath Mr Zephat's lobes; I enjoyed seeing Dayv shut up for once. I showed off by daring to speak to Mr Zephat – even if he

ignored me. Dayv would have to admit I was showing face to speak to an adult first, before being addressed. I sensed he'd be impressed by a girl who dared to break a few rules.

"Good morning, sir," I ventured, maybe not loud enough for him to hear.

He turned, fixed me with a stare, then his face relaxed.

"Morning!" he replied. "Charley, isn't it?" He glanced at our house, then bent down again, continued with his work. Maybe he didn't want to get me into trouble for starting the conversation.

Dayv nudged me again. I saw (from the fleeting look of admiration he'd not covered up in time) that I had the most face, at least for today. He wanted me to continue the conversation, but I'd run out of things to say.

Another nudge. My status was at risk.

"Why don't you have any link-nodes?" I blurted out.

I heard a gasp from Dayv. Mr Zephat stopped his work and looked at me – stared at both of us as we squirmed.

"I'm exempt, of course." The corners of his eyes creased a little, but he kept his mouth firm. "You didn't think I was breaking the Law of '97?" He came up to the fence, pushed a skinny bare arm through the Dome – over our land! – and motioned us to come forward.

We had no choice. There was no going back. No running into the house. He couldn't hurt us, anyway. Everything on the link was always being recorded and monitored by our Guardian Angels.

I was the one closest to him, standing like Dad was the other day. Dayv hung back a little.

"I am... was... an astronaut," Mr Zephat whispered. "Astronauts are exempt from the link."

"Why?"

He shrugged, then said: "You should ask Them that, not me." I could hear the capital letter for "Them" in his voice.

"Are you human?" Dayv asked.

Mr Zephat looked startled (it seemed a reasonable question to me), then rested his full weight against the fence, his elbows along the top. I saw that he had thin scars running across his wrists and, because his shirt was open at the neck, I could see a cross-patch of thicker scar tissue around his throat.

I wondered if it had anything to do with his astronauting.

He glanced up at our sky. "That's the Spiral Galaxy in Ursa Major," he commented.

"Good guess," I said. I rotated the whirlpool of stars until they returned to their natural position.

"Ah! You had me fooled. It's Andromeda."

I nodded. "I like seeing it head on."

"Have you really seen it?" he asked.

I didn't understand his meaning. "There it is." I pointed upwards.

"No," he said. "Where did you get the image from? Did you record it yourself? I've seen it with my own eyes, from space."

"I got it from the link, of course."

I wondered if he needed reminding that the whole point of our sky-domes was to seal our residential domes

off from the polluted air of the world, and shield us from the harsh ultraviolet sunlight. We live healthier than the millions of poorer, undomed peoples of Earth. Our society is more developed than theirs, of course. Dad says it's much better now than in the old days.

Besides, with sky-domes we were never at the mercy of the weather, and we could have any sky – any view – we wished.

Mr Zephat looked thoughtful. Then he smiled. "Come in for tea," he suggested. "I am a human... I'll show you my souvenirs. Cyborgs don't keep mementos."

Dayv didn't want to go. We discussed it over the link. Even if Mr Zephat had link-nodes hidden somewhere else (now there's a thought!) he couldn't access our private channel. I wanted to see his souvenirs. Dayv said he probably wasn't an astronaut, just one of those space-dreamer jerks. I said he seemed nice, and anyway we had our Guardian Angels. Dayv said that Paeds knew how to mask link signals with false VR – we'd be fresh meat for him. I won the argument by stating that I was going anyway and if he wimped out, then that was too bad.

I knew that Dad would be furious with me. A frowning Guardian Angel with a wagging finger popped up in VR space, just in front of my eyes. I knew what to do: Guardian bypass codes bought on the black market have their uses. I cancelled my Guardian Angel's warning and the angry face melted into byte limbo.

I told Mr Zephat we'd both be happy to have tea. He opened a hole in the Dome large enough for us to scramble through, then led us across his lawn towards his house.

All the time I kept the link channel open; at the slightest dip in signal we'd both high-tail it out of there.

I was too nervous at first to notice much about his garden – just a vague impression of a lawn much like ours, maybe with better oiled borders (but then Dad can't do ours every day – he has to be serviced twice a week), and a strange golden apparatus at the end of it, sitting on three legs like a giant insect.

Mr Zephat called it a brass telescope.

We entered his house through large window-paned doors. Some chairs were scattered about in the room, and Mr Zephat bustled around, arranging them so that he had one to sit down on, opposite two for us, with a small table in between. Then, motioning us to be seated, he left to get some drinks. We lowered ourselves cautiously onto the chairs, sinking into the soft, worn upholstery, both looking around the cluttered room and wondering what we'd let ourselves in for.

I ignored the VR projector that took up most of the floorspace (though I noticed it was one of the old, bulky government-issue models)... my attention was held by a bookcase which covered one wall – my Search Angel on the link told me the name. Spines of (get this!) paper books filled the shelves which

ran from the floor to the ceiling. The only things which broke up the lines of books were two grey, dusty rocks which poked out along the shelves. I supposed they were bookstops. I raised a finger and pointed out the bookcase to Dayv. Mr Zephat was clearly older than he looked.

"Here you are!" said our host, entering the room with a tray of drinks. I guessed he wasn't used to entertaining. Two of the mugs were chipped quite heavily around the rims. He picked a glass out for himself – when it caught the light I saw it had fine fractures around its base, though he didn't seem to mind.

I took a sip; tried not to pull a face.

Dayv gulped down half of his drink – a sour orange juice with bits in – and sat back, looking around the room like a kid waiting for the show to start. "Is there gold in space?" he asked.

"Yes!" said Mr Zephat. "More than on Earth, though I never saw any. I'm not a miner, you know. I'm a geologist."

We tried to look impressed while we accessed the link for relevant files. My Search Angel came up with "the science of minerals." Dayv looked distracted; he may have discovered a more comprehensive file and needed time to ingest it.

Mr Zephat watched Dayv's expressionless face for a moment. We both sipped our drinks together in silence, then he asked me if I was interested in space travel.

Dad always says "don't lie." "No," I said.

"Oh." He seemed taken aback, and sipped his juice again.

I felt sorry for him, so I confessed: "I think the bit between the planets is boring. There's nothing there. I like other worlds, though. Aliens."

He looked relieved. "You're right!" he said. "The journey's never much, but it's always worth it once you get there."

"Have you seen the Martian aliens? The fossils?" I asked.

"No," he admitted. "I've never been to Mars."

"All astronauts have been to Mars," Dayv chirped up. "You're not a proper astronaut then."

"I don't need Mars," Mr Zephat said. "I've been to the Moon!"

He looked at us triumphantly, not realizing that our stunned silence covered a frantic search through the link for information on Astronaut Zephat who went to the Moon. My surprise grew as the seconds ticked by. I did know some things about the Moon, one of which was that less than a hundred people had ever been there.

"A geologist on the Moon," Dayv said. I could tell he was quoting the words directly out of a file. "Jack Schmitt–"

"No," said Mr Zephat. "He was in the first wave. I came at the end of the second, nearly a hundred years later. We went there by



rocket."

Dayv smiled. Nobody travelled by rocket nowadays.

"I went there to help set up a Lunar Base," Mr Zephath continued. "They needed a geologist to study the rocks around the site; I'd assess their usefulness for lunar colonization. Yet I was the last to leave, or so I thought at the time."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Mr Zephath leaned forward. "I have discovered a secret. I can't tell you how. It's an access code that clears our Garden Domes enough to see through them!"

"You want to look up and see the dirty sky?" Dayv asked, amazed. "I can understand star-watching, but the dome shows them to me perfectly. All the planets, the constellations. They can't be seen, otherwise. It's too hazy. Anyway, I enjoy making up my own patterns of stars."

"Before I was an astronaut, I dabbled in astronomy," Mr Zephath answered. "I wished to continue this hobby... to see space, even if I can't visit there any more." He pointed towards his garden, at the telescope. "I've seen the Moon. The mountains are unchanged." He looked directly into my eyes, as if to gauge my reaction. "The seas have green patches!"

"Seas?" I said, puzzled.

"Mares," Mr Zephath replied. "Empty plains of volcanic lava and dust. Grey plains, when I was there. Now green spreads across their surface."

"Green?" I said. I wondered whether to look this up, but I needed more information to ask my Search Angel. Dayv was silent.

Mr Zephath looked sad. "They teach so little, these days? Green means chlorophyll. Life. The Moon's edge is now slightly blurred, the images waver sometimes. An atmosphere is being created! They are colonizing the Moon in secret. They can get away with it because we live as we do; enclosed in our domes. Linked, yet blind to the outside world."

"For our own safety," Dayv said. "You can't clear the dome. It just goes blank. That's to stop the UV getting through."

"Maybe. Perhaps it suits Them to let us think that." He leaned forward and took my hand. I flinched, but didn't pull away from his moist touch. "I have seen beyond! I have been there, once. I must tell someone. Believe me." His eyes grew moist, and he sniffed, then sighed as he released my hand.

Embarrassed by his sudden outburst, I turned my eyes away from him.

"Show us," Dayv said.

"I can't." Mr Zephath shook his head. "They suspect I'm onto them. They're watching me now. If a satellite sees my dome clear again, they'll have me for sure."

Dayv sent me a message over the link – he wanted to leave.

"Have you got souvenirs from the Moon?" I asked. "Show me something." The words *prove it* hung unspoken in the air.

Mr Zephath went quiet. I knew that it was illegal for astronauts to personally profit from Offworld ventures – the Space Companies wanted to keep it all for them-

selves. He'd have no proof he could show us.

In answer, he reached behind him and pulled up a cardboard box, which he placed on the table.

"My gauntlets." He lifted a pair of large white gloves out of the box – spacesuit gloves. I could see fine grey dust caught in the creases. "These have touched the surface of the Moon!"

We reached forward. He allowed us to feel the stiff material with our fingers. I ran a fingernail down a crease and collected some dark specks under it.

"Moondust?" I said. Mr Zephath nodded. My mind tried to encompass the place where this dust had lain for billions of years. It seemed so much more real than a moment before. More real than a sky I only knew of through the link. A sky which I now realized I trusted others to tell me about. I thought of the brightest object in the night sky.

"Have you been to Ceres?" I asked.

"Once," said Mr Zephath. "I felt a traitor. If they hadn't towed the asteroid into Earth orbit to use as a space-dock, the Moon would have been colonized by all of us. By me. Not Them." He gazed out of the window, perhaps looking beyond his garden to a future that never was.

"Are those moon rocks?" I pointed at the bookcase.

Mr Zephath looked startled, then shook his head. "No! They're from my garden." He forced a smile. "I couldn't have moon rock here, just lying around the house."

"Can I have another drink?" I asked. "That was nice." Dayv threw me a disgusted look.

"Certainly," said Mr Zephath. He took my empty glass and left the room.

I jumped up and went to the bookcase.

The rocks were dark, like granite, but with a powdery surface. I brushed my hand against one of them, then inspected the residue in the palm of my hand, but the fine dark particles looked like specks of black pepper. Nothing magical: they smelt metallic, with a dry taste which lay in my throat.

"Can you get it out?" Dayv asked, watching from the door.

The smaller of the two rocks was wedged tight between the books. I squeezed my fingers around its side and tried to get a grip. "No," I said.

Just then, Dayv waved his hand and moved back towards the chairs. I reached them just as Mr Zephath entered the room.

"Here you are!" he said, holding up a mug.

I took it, then drained it as he watched, bemused.

We both knew it was time to leave, but I noticed that Mr Zephath gave a worried glance back at the bookcase. Later on, I remembered I hadn't straightened out the books I'd disturbed.

Once we were safely back in my garden, Dayv sighed with relief. "He's mad," he said. "It's brilliant. I need a subject for my Citizenship Exam Thesis. A deranged astronaut, unable to settle back into society. A perfect subject. Everyone knows the Moon's been abandoned. There aren't even any censored link files about it. I've just done a search."

"Do you think he's really been an astronaut?" I asked. "Those gloves looked real."

"Sure they were real," said Dayv. A determined look came on his face. "I'll get those gloves off him. That'll prove he's kept property that should have been returned."

"He's got a point about the sky-domes," I said.

Dayv snorted in contempt. "Paranoia. These days we live under domes, or travel and work underground. It's healthier, isn't it? This ex-astronaut is claiming that he's seen activity on the Moon, but guess what? He can't show it to us. He's mad."

Then my Guardian Angel reappeared, wagging that phantom finger. It shouldn't have come back! With horror, I realized that the programme had merely silenced the snoop, not cancelled it. That's what comes from dealing with the black market.

Dad would find me out.

Dayv smiled, oblivious to my personal disaster. "I'm going to start on the thesis straight away," he said, excitedly. "This'll get me a Citizenship!" He squeezed my hand meaningfully.

I turned and went into the house, to wait for Dad to come home.

I didn't see Dayv for a week after that – Dad bawled me out for bothering our neighbour and kept me studying for eight days straight in the VR unit.

That was how I caught Mr Zephat breaking into our Dome.

You see, it was past the zeroth hour and everyone else was asleep. VR study makes me restless at night (with all that enforced data-compression sleep in the day). I was alone, still serving my time in the VR and idly flicking through our outside scanners when a movement against the dome wall caught my eye.

I turned up the infra-red gain and expanded the view; I could see our picket fence, dark in infra-red but speckled with bright flashes as the bee units went about their nocturnal business. Then a glowing shape, a leg, hung over the fence, followed swiftly by a man's outline. I could tell it was Mr Zephat. His lanky limbs, the ungainly way he moved as he crossed our lawn, it gave him away. Besides, the figure had come from his side of our boundary and it was impossible to believe that somebody else could cross his garden before reaching ours – the security barriers on all our properties combined would be too difficult to overcome. I guessed he was using an illegal domebreaker. They were available from the Western Anarchies, at a price. He must have fooled our security system somehow.

My finger, poised over the alarm button, wavered as he made a move towards our house. Luckily (for both of us), Mr Zephat turned, hurried across the lawn to the far border, then bent down beside the fence. He stayed that way while I debated whether to let Dad know what was happening. Something held me back. Perhaps it was because I was still incarcerated in the VR for my last involvement with Mr Zephat; this would be my revenge on Dad. Another secret about Mr Zephat he wouldn't know about.

After a while, Mr Zephat left our garden and resealed the dome. I erased the images from our camera memo-

ries and tried to get to sleep. Whatever he'd deposited in our border would have to wait... I only had three days left of my sentence.

A month passed, but we never saw Mr Zephat again.

Dad tried to discover where they'd taken him, but he came up against that "wall of silence" that so infuriated him. He asked me several times about our visit to Mr Zephat's, but I never told him about the strange rocks in the bookcase. I think he was worried that I'd been corrupted – apart from risking "antisocial crime by association."

One day, Dayv came round, fresh from his latest citizenry tutorial. It had inspired him to come up with an explanation. He pointed out that a citizen's link-nodes were often removed if they were on probation. Mr Zephat was being watched, and he'd committed another crime, this time ending in asset-strip?

I knew what the crime was; Mr Zephat had used the code again. He'd looked up at the Moon, and they'd caught him in the act.

The thought of the old man having all his property, his capital assets and anything else he owned taken by the authorities, leaving him only with his body stripped of useful parts, and working as a cyborg unit in a processor somewhere, just turned my stomach.

Dayv swore to me that he'd not shopped the old man; it wasn't his fault. He protested that he'd not gotten round to it before Mr Zephat had gone missing, anyway. He looked so hurt that I almost believed him.

Besides, with Mr Zephat gone, and the house cleared, Dayv had no Citizenship Thesis Subject. He'd ended up deferring the exam for a full hectoday.

By then, I didn't care. Things had cooled between us.

I waited until Dayv went and Dad had shut down for the night.

The box was heavy. It had given me grief digging it up, then smuggling it into my room. Once again I pulled it out from under my bed and stared down at the rocks, the brass telescope and, secure from the link, a sheet of paper with the dome access code written on it. I pulled on the now familiar spacegauntlets and ran my fingers over their rough surfaces.

I couldn't rat on Mr Zephat, and if Dayv knew the dome access code, he'd have put it in his thesis and it would have been all over the Link – then they would have deleted it.

I need that code.

Tonight I'm going to look up, and see the Moon.

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**Nigel Brown** made his *Interzone* fiction debut with "Under the Overlight" (issue 165), but he contributed a few book reviews prior to that. He lives in Sussex, and works as an optometrist. Over the past few years, he has contributed stories to a number of small-press publications, including the U.S. magazine *Aboriginal SF*.



# GRASS

*Dominic Green*

**H**e stared at the few small grains in the cat's cradle of lines in her palm.

"So what? It's only a seed."

"It's more than just a seed. This is the result of many winters of labour. When the first work begun on these seeds, that glacier stretched from here to Mammoth-in-Must's territory, and Mammoth-in-Must was a toothless infant."

There was a resounding *crack* as promontories of ice broke from the Old Man's Spine over a mile away. He stared at the seed again, as if trying to see 30 years in it, and giggled nervously.

"You're shitting me. Surely it would be bigger."

"It *is* bigger. The ears on the High Tide Strain are nearly five times as big as an average ear from the common variety."

"What's an average?"

"A thing in the middle of a group."

He tried staring at the grains again. "Red Ochre, it's only a piece of *grass*."

She smiled an infuriating secret smile.

"If you had *any* idea how many types of grass there are, Aurochs. The Temple has categorized over 13 different varieties."

His brows knitted together. "How many is 13?"

She dropped into the unmathematical layman's speech. "Two-hands-and-three. Sorry. Force of habit. Anyway, I don't *care* if you don't like my grass. This grass could solve mankind's hunger problems forever."

The two old chieftains stared into each other's faces warily. Even here, with Temple leaders present, each was wary of an attempt by the other to violate the rights of host and guest.

This would be difficult.

Trying to pull the chiefs' eyeballs down onto himself rather than onto each other, Tiny Acorn danced into the centre of the living cave, raising his ceremonial bear-claw staff high, and banged it on the limestone three times.

"Bear witness all present that the priests of mankind here call upon the Chosen People of the Gods to defend the territory of Man against alien aggression. The Mutants are everywhere on our borders. Our armies are few, and poorly supplied. We cannot hold out against continual Mutant encroachment."

The host chieftain, Mammoth-in-Must, whose territory stretched from these karst hills to the river, cleared his throat, spat on the fire, and spoke.

"I have never seen a Mutant, and none of the old songs sing of there being Mutants in the world. I quote the Song of the Wars of Extirpation – 'there are two varieties of bipedal animal, Man and Primitive Man.' Primitive Man was exterminated by the concerted effort of our forefathers as described in the Song, leaving Man alone as inheritor of the world. It is the belief of many that these Mutant myths are simply excuses for the priesthood to order purifications of territories that displease them. The warriors of my territory have lived here since men now old were young, and none of these old men have ever seen a Mutant either. And even if these creatures do exist and are so distastefully inferior to us, why is it proving so difficult for the territories on our borders to subdue them?"

The guest chieftain, Fifty Winters – he had had another name once, but due to the respect his immense age engendered, had long since ceased to be known by it – filled the silence that followed. Unfortunately, he rambled.

"I saw a Mutant once... in the old territory of my grandfather, who was flint cutler to the chieftain of Dog Fang Mountain, in the days when this land and mine still lay under a retreating icefield. We came upon a village, completely destroyed, in the snow, teethmarks in the corpses... not human teethmarks. Sharp and small. My grandfather saw something moving in the undergrowth, stabbed at it, and wounded it... but it left too easy a trail, so we did not follow it."

*How many of the hunters in this audience understood that? thought Tiny Acorn. The old ones are the only ones nodding. Never follow a wounded animal that is careful to make an easy trail. It may not be as wounded as it appears. Here we see why this doddering old fool is still chieftain of his tribe.*

*By the looks on these young men's faces, all they can be bothered to see is the doddering old fool.*

"There will soon be Mutants aplenty for all to see," said Tiny Acorn. "The territories west of the Dog's Jaw Range are overrun; the Mutants attack our settlements to expand their own hunting ranges, and also to take our women. The Mutant strain is dominant; every time one of theirs takes one of our women, the offspring is also Mutant. Thus we cannot expand our territory by the use

of slave concubines, and they can. Fleeing masses of true humanity are making the task of defending the front-line territories east of the Dog's Jaw even more difficult."

Fifty Winters, whose territory lay entirely behind the God's Ejaculate River, licked his lips and looked around his supporters anxiously.

"We should fall back and regroup behind the God's Ejaculate River, which the creatures cannot cross effectively in force. Our ancestors, when defending the Northern Landmass against Primitive Human incursions from the Equatorial, established a battle line on the shores of the Long River. 'And the Primitives were confounded, for the river was as a bulwark to us.'"

Mammoth-in-Must spat into the fire in disgust. "And when defending against the first Heathen Jihad, our more immediate ancestors attempted the same trick on the Zephyr River. Granted, they were fighting humans rather than demons, but I quote the song: 'Then came the winter, and the liquid bulwark of the faithful became the frozen roadway of the heathen.' Should we cede to the Mutants our hunting grounds on this side of the river? Then they will grow even stronger, and the next time the river freezes they will cross and push us back again!"

Fifty Winters railed. "And should we expand into their territory, increasing the area of land our few remaining warriors must defend? I have spoken to travellers! There is a whole world of Mutants out there, Mammut! The Equatorial Landmass pumps them out like flies out of the arse of a dead elephant!"

Tiny Acorn crashed his staff down on the rock again, shaking his clenched fist, which had been clenched for the duration of his speech, at the crowd. "Enough! The Gods have already recommended a course of action!" Having angered both of them into silence, he added a softener. "As should be expected from men who are leaders of men, you are both correct. At the midpoint of this winter, when the cold light of the sun is closest to us and freezes the Earth and the Mutants migrate south, we shall march and occupy the thin lands up by Gap-in-the-Teeth, where a battle line shall be established to hold the Dog's Jaw against westward Mutant expansion. We will thereby be enabled to hold this entire subcontinent against further aggression. As the Song says: 'And the Primitives were prevented from multiplying on Men's side of the Long River, and died on their own side.' Such was and is the will of the Gods."

Fifty Winters muttered darkly. "The Primitives did not expire of their own accord in the Equatorial Landmass. Something wiped them out, and then crossed the Long River itself, and I suspect it walks on two legs like a man and carries subtle weapons our hands cannot duplicate. In short, it is a Mutant. But how will we supply an army to defeat the Mutants on the march?"

Tiny Acorn shrugged. "With Mutant slaves, a food source that marches with the army. What could be simpler? Recent victories using this technique have proven highly effective in subduing those pockets of Heathendom that still remain in the north."

Mammoth-in-Must was sullen. "And what do the Wars of Religion prove? That a few poor remnants of Mouserian-speaking mammoth-worshippers who still flake

axes by shying chunks of quartz at their cave walls and seeing what shape they break into can't defend themselves against modern edged weapons?"

Tiny Acorn persisted. "Before the invention of cannibalism, the effective supply of an army in the field was impossible. The recent victories of the Gods' Chosen have proven the efficacy of the new technology. Now we have a mobile supply corps that doubles as rations." He cast a watchful eye around the chamber. "Thanks be to the Gods."

A reluctant catechism murmur echoed round the walls. "Thanks be to the Gods."

Fifty Winters, however, would not be silent. "But the attrition on our villages will be immense! A village of 50 requires a foraging population of ten hunters, as prescribed in the Song of Counsel to Chieftains. Take any more than five hunters from a village, and you will see the big-bellied death among the superfluous population – children, women –"

"– And chieftains," interjected a wag from Mammoth-in-Must's camp. There was an uneasy rumble of humour, but Mamut reminded the joker with a freezing glare that he, too, was a chieftain; then, he added a rumble of his own.

"Fifty Winters is right. Any army from Mankind's Interior will take a year to reach these outlands. In our Song of the Journey of Running Dog, the stars move once round the entire sky before Running Dog returns home from the holy places. Are we to fight these Mutant hordes alone for one circuit of stars, while our women and children starve?"

Tiny Acorn raised the same closed fist, which he still appeared reluctant to open. "Questions such as this are only to be expected from those favoured by the Father," he said carefully. "The God also expected them, and answered them." He clapped his hands, and the Great Surprise came forward to stand by the firelight.

There was a chorus of exhalations, like a school of beached whales sounding.

Then, Mamut said, in a low, even voice:

"Are you *sure* it was the God who was talking to you, Tiny Acorn?"



They looked good, it had to be admitted. There was a certain perverted thrill to seeing a woman dressed as a warrior, although the traditional tribal scarification had been replaced with woad and ochre warpaint. The spears were full warriors' spears, however, fitted with bifacial, cutting-edge points and boar-killing crosspieces. The necklaces of dogs' teeth around their necks were also the latest warrior fashion, though some of the older warriors stared at them in disapproval. Such fancy trinkets were too delicate to be made by men. They could only be obtained east of the Dog's Jawbone – by conquest if one really *was* a valiant Mutant-killer, or by trade if one merely wanted to *appear* to be so.

"Huntresses," said Fifty Winters, rolling his tongue round the new word.

"But..." came a consternated old voice from the crowd. "Hunting is *men's* work." The voice came from Cave-Lion-Foaming-at-the-Mouth, a wizened creature who had possibly been worthy of the name in his time. Now, however, those boys in Fifty Winters' camp who were about to come of age were waiting for Cave-Lion-Foaming-at-the-

Mouth to die so they could take his name.

Tiny Acorn flicked his fist away contemptuously, as if it were not worthy to be attached to his arm. "Hunting what? Hunting fauns and roots and berries? We all talk of the great hunts of our ancestors, respected gentlemen, but how many times a year does a bold warrior go out to hunt rhinoceros? The solid part of hunting is the non-heroic part. How much resistance did your last root put up, Foaming-at-the-Mouth?"

There was a barely suppressed giggle from Mammoth-in-Must's camp.

"But if the women are allowed to leave the village," exclaimed Foaming-at-the-Mouth, lost in a nightmare of his own imagining, "they will *run away*."

"*Yours* might run away," came the same voice from Mammoth-in-Must's corner.

Tiny Acorn put up his mysterious closed fist again for silence.

"The distance our new female work teams will need to cover in a day's labour will also be far less than that travelled by a male hunting party. These women will be meeting the food needs of their villages, not only by foraging, but also by the use of a new invention which will greatly increase the amount of food available to us." He opened his hand at last. In it nestled a few seeds, like eggs in a birds' nest. "We call this innovation 'Supergrass' –"

For a brief disbelieving moment, all eyes were fixed on the contents of the young priest's palm. Then, soot shook off the sumptuous veined fluorite of the walls with the volume of laughter.

"Eating grass!"

"You would have us wear our teeth flat to the gum!"

"The List of the Two Hundred Foods Good For Eating specifically proscribes grass!"

"Are you going to have the bigger and plumper ones among us play cows, and the leaner ones hunt them for food?"

Tiny Acorn remained frozen, the grain still in his palm. It took a very, very long time for the warriors to hush their noise, and then only out of an amused curiosity as to what the priest might say in reply.

He looked up, fixing his eyes on Mammoth-in-Must's.

"Did you observe that fattened lion cub tethered by the gate as you entered? I believe you commented favourably on the depth of meat on his haunches. You will enjoy those haunches later on tonight. I shall see to it personally that you will.

"That cub has fed on little else but Supergrass grains, powdered into cake, for the last seven weeks. It has proven necessary to supplement a pure Supergrass diet with the occasional light fish or rabbit stew, but under that regimen he has grown fit and healthy."

Mammoth-in-Must stared at the grass grains in horror.

"What does it taste like?" he said.

Tiny Acorn frowned. "The taste is being worked on. The important thing is that a patch of this grass a thousand paces square can now support one of our villages. This valley alone could support a hundred villages."

Fifty Winters regarded the grains as if they were the eggs of thousand-foot spiders. "Where does this – Super-

grass – grow?”

“Nowhere,” exclaimed Tiny Acorn proudly. “The Temple made it.”

Fifty Winters smiled a half-smile, as if not quite sure Tiny Acorn was trying to catch him out. “The Temple made grass? Out of what? Out of clay?”

“No,” said Tiny Acorn, meeting Fifty Winters’ half-smile with a full one of his own. “Out of other grass.”

The laughter returned. Tiny Acorn was drenched in the spittle of 30 men’s hilarity. Blinking in growing annoyance, he nevertheless remained calm.

“You are familiar with the practice of scattering the seeds of a plant which one has foraged?”

Mammoth-in-Must nodded. “That way the plant continues.”

Tiny Acorn nodded back. “Imagine that, if one had the patience and the time, one watched those seeds, and where they fell, and noted what type of plant grew there – how quickly it grew, how sharp its thorns, how large and luscious its berries. And imagine that one took only the best plants of those that grew, and scattered their seed in the second generation. And gradually, over very many years, the quality of the plants would increase, until—”

He held out the grains of Supergrass in his palm.

“Why does it increase?” exclaimed a lost warrior, and this time it was the ridicule of his fellows that fell upon him.

Tiny Acorn breathed a soundless sigh. They had understood.

“How many years are required to do this?” came a voice from the back of the crowd.

Tiny Acorn stood solemn. “The priestesses of the She-Bear Sect have been at this project for a number of winters equal to the fingers on a village of warriors.”

Two men’s lifetimes.

“Can we do this with women?” said a gleeful warrior. “Can we pick the pretty ones, and scatter them like seed?”

At this point, someone evidently quietly explained the workings of human reproduction to the young man in question. The knowledge being imparted into his ears inflated his eyes to the size of goose eggs.

“The principle could be applied to captive Mutants, to turn them into real people,” offered an enthusiastic researcher. “We could pick the ones that aren’t spindly-thin, and don’t jabber.”

The idea was beginning to catch on. “We could produce small, manageable bears and lions and tigers and keep them in pens. Then every warrior in our village would be able to eat the flesh of the tiger, as Flesh-of-the-Tiger’s mother fed him tiger flesh in the Song of Flesh-of-the-Tiger before he ‘went forth to slay a thousand enemies.’ We would be invincible!”

Tiny Acorn looked at the end of his staff. This was getting out of hand.



“This is *not* food! It is *not* prescribed by the gods! Sacred songs say that all wholesome food was made by Mother Bear and Father Bear out of their own excrement! But this food is the making of man, and do we eat the makings of our brothers’ bottoms, be they ever so appetizing?”

Cornered Aurochs listened to the young man’s ranting

with vague disquiet. Though he didn’t yet seem to bear the spiral cheek cicatrices of a full hunter, he seemed to be attracting listeners. Young listeners whose spear-points were still only sticks hardened by fire; but strong listeners nevertheless.

“These modified organisms are affronts to nature! I for one will allow no priest-perverted foods to pass my lips!”

“Then starve with the rest of the carnivores,” came a voice from the crowd.

The young man stared down from his soapstone perch outside the entrance to the caves as if struck. It was not just what the voice had said that had shaken him, but the fact that the voice was a woman’s.

The voice continued. “How many meat-eaters does one valley support? And how many grazers? Does the Song of Counsel to Chieftains not say that ‘among beasts and chieftains alike, only one lion will be found for every two hands of goats?’”

The young man seized on a perceived advantage. “Ah, but I would rather be a lion than a goat!” The crowd roared at his wit, sharp as a stone blade.

With a start, Aurochs recognized the owner of the voice. It was his own Red Ochre. “Would you? Would you *really*? Which animal is the first to leave the valley when the grasses wither?”

The young man considered this; women in the crowd were laughing at him, and the men were nodding and murmuring. He appeared to give up on that tack, for he changed it.

“Are you denying that spreading these seeds of modified grass requires more than twice as much labour as foraging?”

This time, the murmur broke out among the women, and it was the men who laughed. The speaker exploited his advantage. “Are you also denying that this new invention is a hindrance, rather than a boon, to the average citizen of mankind? Have you spoken to any of these delightful young women of the work involved in clearing rocks from the modified grass plots beforehand for ‘preparation’? Of the clearing of all other plants, animals and insects from the plantation, day after day after day? Of the time spent watching the fields, hour by hour, scaring away birds and rats and elephants and practically everything that eats?”

“Practically everything that eats wants to eat Supergrass,” said Red Ochre, shrugging. But Aurochs noted that many of the younger, prettier girls, those with smooth hands and cheeks that they wanted to save from rock-handling until they had captured a husband, turned away. The young man seized his advantage and raised both his hands and his voice.

“Have you also told these good citizens of the fate that awaits one in every ten children they shall feed their vile excrescences? Violent sicknesses, a swelling of the face, a closing of the throat; I wish I could say a swift death, but a spear in the belly would be mercy by comparison. Our physicians have long known that a susceptible child can be killed by certain poisons contained within even a *single grain of ordinary grass*. We are told that an unlucky few ‘cannot tolerate’ the wonders of Supergrass; the implication seems to be that we should gladly sacrifice the weak among



our people in order to feed the strong. But what if your child was among the weak ones, good citizens of Man? Could you deliver that child into the earthy jaws of the ungrateful grave, just in order to placate our fanatical priesthood?"

Aurochs shouldered his way to the back of the crowd behind Red Ochre.

"Is any of that true?" he whispered.

"Perfectly true," she said, nodding. "And perfectly misrepresented. This fellow knows perfectly well that no one who displays symptoms of the allergic reaction he describes needs to be force-fed Supergrass."

"Why not?" said Aurochs, mystified.

"What do we live on now, Aurochs?" said Red Ochre. "There's no reason for us to stop feeding on meat and honey as well just because Supergrass exists."

"Really?" said Aurochs, brightening. "In any case, you shouldn't worry yourself with this fellow. Eventually he'll shout so loud someone will carry him to the edge of the village and throw him in the river. I've got news. There's a unit of Mobile Supply walking into town."

Red Ochre was alarmed. "Mutants?"

"The very same. Captured with heavy losses in last year's winter offensive. 'And the host of Man did fall upon the Primitives, and brake their bones for pressure flakers.' They're parading them through town as a show of our new military capabilities. An army marching on its stomach!"



Red Ochre leaned on Aurochs' shoulder as on a shelf of warm cooling lava, and gawped down at a column of walking dead.

"I've seen what Daddy said were Mutant-made pictures drawn on the wall of a cave we sheltered in one winter when we travelled through some of the backward mountain districts," she said. "He got us out of that cave pretty fast, even though the hearth in it was obviously abandoned. But I never believed they really were that thin and wasted. The poor things look like marching skeletons."

The creatures were ugly, but not as irredeemably as mountain apes. Their faces were squashed flat into their skulls, and those skulls were deceptively high and domed – though not as large as a human skull, Red Ochre remembered. Sub-Priest Leaping Beaver's water experiment had proven this scientifically.

Aurochs throttled the shaft of the spear with his hands. "The Epic of Gap-in-the-Teeth says one of those marching skeletons can swim a frozen river ten spears' lengths across, leap over a barricade one man high, and run half as fast again as a proper human being. They can and will eat anything, including us." He bared his teeth. "So it's a good job it's us who's going to be doing the eating."

The marching skeletons did not look like the remnants of a conquering army. Rather, they looked empty, like human vessels out of which the unstoppered soul had been poured. Red Ochre reminded herself of other descriptions of the field kitchen battalions.

*It proves they are men without souls, for there are none to be seen in their eyes.*

"What must it be like," she said, almost to herself, "to still walk, and yet know you are food?"

"They don't feel anything," said Aurochs, not sounding entirely sure of his words.

"They feel exactly the same as we do," said Red Ochre. "The She-Bear Sect proved that human consciousness resides in the head by selectively removing parts of the brains of Mutant captives. Then they tried the same experiment on Heathen human captives, with the same results."

"How would that tell them anything?" said Aurochs. "They'd be dead." Then he thought a little more on the subject, and said, "oh."

"What are you looking at me like that for? If we don't do experiments of that sort, we'll never get to know how the human body works. In the Song of the Thousand Years' Battle it says that Mother and Father Bear made a gift to us of creatures without souls, but with bodies very similar to human ones, to learn the workings of our own forms. Without this gift we would never have learned of the function of the heart and lungs and the circulation of the blood. As we did then with the Primitives, so we do now with the Mutants. It's *progress*, Aurochs." She giggled. "Did you know that the left side of your head is what makes you able to reason logically?"

"Pardon?" said Aurochs, cupping his left ear in Red Ochre's direction. Red Ochre collapsed laughing, laughing for perhaps a little too long.

"It was a *joke*, Red Ochre," said Aurochs, with a hurt expression.

Below the two laughing humans, the river of soulless eyes marched on through the gorse barricade into the encampment. Behind them, marching warriors carried travois of military supplies.



The pale sliver of sorry slush at one end of the valley had once been the Old Man's Spine Glacier. This approach to Gap-in-the-Teeth, through what had been the territory of Mammoth-in-Must, had only been made possible in the last few years by the continued inexplicable retreat of the great northern ice barrier. Some priests theorized that the sun was moving further from the Earth, taking its cold light with it.

"There are unhappy voices out there," said the young priest warningly. "Harken to the unhappy singer, lest he become a chorus."

"They would be still unhappier, Prickly Thornbush, if we were overrun by wild Muties and starving. In the war between the Unhappy Healthy Tribe and the Hungry Happy Tribe in 'The Song of the War Between the Unhappy Healthy Tribe and the Hungry Happy Tribe,' I need not remind you of who it was who won." The ageing chieftain flipped a sheep's eyeball into his mouth and bit down on it. Whatever lived in the middle of sheep's eyeballs dribbled down his chin.

"In their eyes, respected father, they are already overrun by Mutants. There are over 40 of the creatures in this village alone –"

"Which means what? That we have enough ambulatory meat to last out the winter. I tell you what would *really* make them restless, though, Thornbush; and that's if they found out what we've been feeding our Mutants

on all this time."

Thornbush lowered his gaze, as if unhappy to be speaking on such a subject.

"Our marching munchies do themselves need at least half as much food as human beings, after all, Thornbush. And where do we get that food from? What is in the back of those travoises that follow the kitchen battalions? *You* know, Thornbush. *I* know. But they don't, and I'm glad as the sun's cold burning hell of the fact."

"It's the only way to test the stuff," said Thornbush. "The people would never stand for us testing it on humans."

"And when you've finished testing, you know what they'll say? 'Oh, it's good enough for Mutants, but it's not fit for *real* people.' And where will your miracle foodstuff be then? The proverb goes, I believe, that No Rat Will Eat Lettuce, If it Can Obtain Cheese."

"Our lettuce, as you put it, serves a good purpose supplying the Mutant battalions."

Sudden Lightning nodded. "And such is its place. As Mammoth-in-Must says to Tiny Acorn in the Epic of Gap-in-the-Teeth, it is your task to feed, and mine to lead the troops. Here is the main thrust of our spearhead to the Dog's Teeth which you see glittering so prettily on our horizon. As soon as the snow melts and the first Mutie attacks come north following the reindeer, there will be meat between those Teeth, and hundreds of our warriors travelling down this valley to poke that meat out with six-foot toothpicks. *That* is what we need to concentrate on. This is our Long River, to lose which would be to lose the entire frontier, and possibly the only subcontinent mankind still exists on in a pure form."

The priest shifted nervously from foot to foot. "Some of the elders have asked me if it's possible to put the walking rations to good use. They quoted the maxim from the Ten Thousand Saws of Illustrious Predecessors that an idle slave should not be fed, but eaten."

"Ah, so, now we get down to it. Lazy old men want someone to haul firewood for them."

"Well, when they aren't in common use by the military, the rations are just milling around idle, so the chieftains thought —"

The chieftain fanned Prickly Thornbush into silence. "I know, I know. One cannot argue with received knowledge. Just make sure there's a good guard on them while they work — they may be weak as kittens, but in the Epic of Freezing Lake, do they not dive into the torrent and think to escape the Seven Brothers' spears by swimming two hands of spears' lengths of glacial meltwater?"

Prickly Thornbush nodded gravely. "And the Seven Brothers think to entangle their hands in the fur of swimming reindeer and follow the foe thus; have they not done so, says the song, the foe has slipped from their grip like a poorly tickled trout. I will take care how I tickle them, respected father."

"One of our warriors for every ten of theirs is the ratio mentioned in the Song of the Enemy. And don't feed them meat, no matter how little working muscle there is on their bones, for it is said that Animals Fed Meat Get Ideas."

Prickly Thornbush nodded and ducked out of the chieftain's private chamber, high in the cliff, looking out at the

distant mountains. The chamber was decorated with spoils of war, looted from what had been the inner chambers of the Mutants' stronghold. Sudden Lightning perused the pornographic carvings of mammoth-breasted Mutant females that the creatures worshipped as their gods. Worshipping images of themselves, as if they were the masters of nature rather than nature's servants. Such arrogance was bound to be punished, sooner or later.

"Sooner," he said to himself through bared teeth, staring at the mountaintops with a bleak white smile.



"It's a high wall," said Aurochs, gazing up at the piled pink granite blocks. "I don't think I could climb a wall that high, these days."

"It has to be. Elephants are very insistent creatures when they're seeking food. We'll only get trouble from them when they start travelling south as the first snows start in a few months' time, of course. The crop's harvested then, but they still cause trouble trampling the ground and clearing the snow with their tusks." She stared up at the wall in pride. "It was all made with the moraine erratics cleared from these grass enclosures. This was one of the first experimental enclosures ever built. *Years* ago. Back when I was a Tenth Mystery initiate and you had just passed your Ordeal-of-Being-Hung-Up-by-Your-Thumbs-Screaming. We had to tell the lay staff the enclosure was a Tenth Mystery thing that they weren't to go in."

Aurochs looked puzzled. "What is the Tenth Mystery?"

Ochre looked severe. "Aurochs, you're an official Temple Guardian. You are supposed to know that."

Aurochs hid his face. "I suppose I must have been inattentive in basic training."

Ochre recited. "Father Bear and Mother Bear are brother and sister, and by their love they made the world."

Aurochs's eyes widened. "Brother and sister? That's *dirty*, Ochre."

"Think about it. Who else was there to sleep with at the time? They realized that if they were to give life to the world they would have to break taboo to do so. They befouled themselves that we might live. Thus the lesson we learn from the Tenth Mystery is that all sins may be forgiven." She narrowed her eyes and looked at Aurochs sharply. "And *don't* ask me who gave birth to Mother Bear and Father Bear. That's a two-hour lecture in advanced metaphysics."

Aurochs, who had already had his mouth open, thought better of it and shut it.

Then, he opened it again. "Things don't stay in my mind as easily as they do in most men's, Ochre. Does that bother you?"

She sniggered. "I used to worry about it, but luckily, that strain in you hasn't bred true. All three of our sons have your size and my brains. So I don't worry about it any more."

Aurochs nodded. "You know, the Mutants — they don't take in instructions either. A simple hundred-phrase sentence seems incomprehensible to them. They don't seem to have the capacity to understand. A few bright ones, maybe. Prickly Thornbush and his staff are experi-

menting with selective breeding, though they don't seem to be producing more intelligent examples, only bigger or smaller ones with different coloured coats. Maybe the Yellowhead Variety are a bit more robust and don't shiver so much in the cold, but they eat too much food and can't take the heat. The Yellowskin Variety are more useful in hot weather and seem to taste nicer, but they're more prone to liver infections. And so on. In any event, Thornbush's breeding programme isn't producing smarter specimens, and we still have to speak to them like children, in single phrases, with the sounds really slow and simple. Even then it's better to use sign language. But I wonder sometimes. Ochre – I saw two Mutants the other day, making pictures with each other in the dirt. Pictures that weren't of anything. Ochre, I'd swear they were communicating. Their brains aren't big enough to store information properly, so they use pictures scrawled in the dirt as long-term storage space. It's the way I think sometimes – tie knots in twine to remind myself of how many slaves need to be taken on firewood duty, how many on field clearance, and how many to the abattoir each shift, and so forth." He looked up at Ochre with an agonized expression. "Does that make me stupid?"

Red Ochre laughed. "No. I suppose it just means your brain works in a different way." She thought a moment, with a face so serious that it frightened Aurochs. "In fact, I never heard of anybody thinking that way. You may be very special, Aurochs." She put her arms around his shoulders, with difficulty, and craned up a long way to nuzzle him. "But then, I always knew you were."

He snorted. "Special like a Mutant, maybe." Changing the subject, he swept his hand round to take in the enclosure wall. "So this will feed our people?"

Red Ochre sat down, supporting a back twisted by three childbirths against the wild apple growing next to the wall. Ten years ago, the apple had been a sapling someone had failed to weed while they piled the erratics up for the enclosure. "If they want to be fed by it. The echoes in our caves today sing of grass only being fit for Mutants, while meat is meet for Men."

"You believe those profanities about kitchen battalions being fed on Supergrass? The 'Song of the Ruminants'?"

She laughed. "What do you think stock rations are made of? Those flat cakes don't get shat out of a big bear's arse, you know."

Aurochs paled. "Ochre, that's blasphemy."

"No it isn't. I'm a priestess. I can't blaspheme. The cakes are grain, ground and baked. Of course, you don't see them in the grain stage. You've never been inside one of the temple complexes. Stock rations have improved our society incredibly in the last ten years, and I need hardly remind you that the smallest and weakest of our babies now shoots up like an oak on being fed Mutant brain offal. Received temple wisdom now has it that we have twice as much free time as we used to, now that we have Mutant slave labour."

Aurochs fingered his spear-shaft nervously. "I worry about that, Ochre. There are now more of them in our own villages than there are of us."

"What's to worry about? They're only Mutants. The

Man Who Saw All With His Own Eyes recounts in the Epic of Frozen Lake that Mutants are fragile creatures, with necks as pale and frail as icicles that can be snapped with a single twist of one strong man's hand."

Aurochs shivered in the summer sunshine. "Two hands of dogs can bring down one deer, and so can two hands of Mutants bring down one man. And they must outnumber us two-hands-to-one-finger. I wish there was something we could *do* about it."

"There is something we can do. Eat Supergrass and cut out the middleman. Right now we need a population of ten of them to support one of us, because we feed on them, and they feed on Supergrass. Our population hasn't increased at all in the last ten years, and theirs has increased tenfold."

Aurochs stared at his feet guiltily. "I tried to eat that cake you made for me. It tasted like dust and stuck in my throat. I gave it to the House Mutant."

"I'll mix it with meat next time."

"Thank you. Hey – who is that coming up the track? I'd better get up, I'm supposed to be on guard." He forced himself erect, feeling his knees protest, and shaded his eyes against the summer sun.

"Ochre – they're carrying fire."



Aurochs regarded the thin figure with the burning brand with deep distrust. A man carried naked fire only if he intended harm. Potential fire was carried by every man, stored in the flints and woodchips he carried in his pack, but the fire this man was carrying had its red teeth bared and flickering down the fat-soaked bundle of rushes wrapped round a dry stick he held in his off hand.

This meant he could not use his spear properly. That was good.

"Who dares violate Temple precincts?" quoted Aurochs.

The leader of the group, a man somewhat younger than Aurochs, but not as shaped for violence by a lifetime of professionally leaping out on large dangerous animals, grinned, held his brand high, and said, "Don't presume to spout sacred words at me. This land isn't holy any longer. It's been violated by a priesthood who would create unclean food to feed our enemies."

Aurochs's eyes narrowed under his brow ridge.

Ochre's voice came from behind Aurochs. "I know him. He's the rabble-rouser who turned our valley against the gift of Supergrass. Hey, little pure white snowflake! We could have fed our people with that unclean food, and outnumbered our enemies, if only you'd allowed us!"

The fire-bearer smiled. "The will of the people was to eat natural food, as the Gods provide. Not to eat manufactured muck. Look at the Mutant slaves we feed on it! They are as thin as flakes struck from an inferior piece of muscovite. Is this not proof enough of the worthlessness of the substance?" His eyes narrowed in turn as he looked at Aurochs. "I remember you too. You once carried me to the edge of your village and threw me in the river."

The crowd behind the fire-bearer were a mixed bunch, old and young, male and female. The only thing they shared was a certain insane look about the eyes.

"If you attempt to come past, I am authorized by military law to kill you," quoted Aurochs.

"I am authorized by *natural* law to set light to that field of disgusting filth," answered the madman.

"You want to eat natural food, as the Gods provide?" said Ochre. "Who made that spear you're carrying? Did the Gods make that?"

The mob orator looked down at his spearpoint, as if he half expected to see deities dancing on it. He seemed disappointed not to see any. "I made it myself," he said. Aurochs had to grudgingly admit to himself that he probably spoke the truth. The spearpoint looked as if it had been banged out of ironstone by a child. "But it is good enough to stop both of you."

"Then how can you say the food you catch with that spear is natural?" said Ochre. "Do you rip the flesh from the bones of an ibex with your teeth? No, you use a hand axe or a scraper. And do the Gods make such things? Look around you, foolish man – you are surrounded by the fruits of human labour. The Gods made us so that we could provide for ourselves. Go down to the fields and stick your head in the dirt like a common swine. You'll find plenty of natural food the Gods provide there."

Aurochs became uncomfortably aware that some of the crowd were moving around him to either side, and that he could not reach them with the six-foot length of his spear.

Abruptly, he ran out of quotes, and began to improvise. "Back!" he shouted. "Get back now, or I'll fetch you a crack you'll remember, see if I don't!"

"You cannot stop all of us," said the madman, smiling. "Lo, we are as numerous as sparks from a fire, and only one of us needs to spit in an elephant's eye to blind it. Your field will burn, and its burning will destroy this dependence on lesser beings which our foolhardy priests have created. If there be a wound in the world, saith the healer, then that wound must be burned clean. Then all things will return to the way they were before, and mankind shall hunt and fish and forage in his forests as he did in his happy primal state in the Song of First Creation."

"No," said Red Ochre, shaking her head deliberately. "You won't destroy the dependence just like that. All you'll do is cut off the Mutants' food supply. They're docile enough when kept as slaves and fed well and allowed to stud every now and again. But starving? Even a rat fights like a tiger when starving, saith the song. Oh, no, my friend. You're blazing a trail to our destruction."

There was the faintest flicker of doubt on the lunatic's face. Then, however, his preconceptions took hold again, and he held the fire high and charged Aurochs's spear head on, making a noise like the terrifying comical moan of a charging bull bear.

Aurochs blinked as he dealt with him, then almost absent-mindedly whacked away an elderly man charging him from the side as he lowered the fanatic to the ground.

"A warrior priest's battle cry," said Ochre. "He was an educated man, once, maybe. But look at the ribs on him. Beware a man spare of flesh, for he is a man without vilage who hunts for himself alone."

"I didn't kill him," said Aurochs. "I hit him with the safe end. I didn't want to waste a good denticulate. Some-

times it takes ages rummaging around inside a dead man's stomach looking for a spear point."

"He's groaning as if he's dead," said Ochre. "Maybe he thinks this is the afterlife."

But on the other side of the wall, a dry crackling could be heard, like the sound of an ambushing army so confident that it was stamping on as many dry twigs as it could find.

The field was on fire.



Call him Adam.

His hands are simply claw-like extensions to the ends of his arms. He has forgotten their true purpose. The creatures that live here appear able to function in this cold, but men are simply turned blue and black and white by it and made to burn all over with the pain.

He might be considered a thinking being. When a thinking being is burning all over with pain, however, it loses the capacity to think, and becomes just another two-armed, two-legged amoeba sliding toward whatever food or warmth it senses.

He has lost toes and fingers in the long forced march from the eastern border of the Monsters' territories. He has learned not to love his fellow prisoners, for he will after all only lose them. Instead, he steals from them, steals food, steals clothing, steals bright objects that serve no purpose but to adorn the fetid corner of the grass shelter in which he lives with up to 30 other Adams. On nights when the wind is high and the Monsters cannot hear, the Adams mumble to each other in Nostratic.

The Monsters look like men, but are bigger, stronger, and sometimes more cunning too. They croon to each other in sounds men cannot make, and sometimes cannot even hear. Wild dogs can hear them, which is why wild dogs are kept chained up at the edges of human camps. Otherwise, wild dogs are useless animals, fit only for the pot and the skinning knife.

The Monsters moan and low at the sun, at the moon, at the stars, while they are working, while they are hunting, while they are playing with their offspring. He has heard moanings being moaned by one Monster to another and then repeated, so this is not birdsong, but some form of communication; but it is not precisely speech, as huge chunks of it are constantly and ponderously reprised, as if the song is so important that every note and phrase must be faithful to the original. What point can there ever be in remembering messages thousands of phrases long?

The Monsters have two sexes, but their women are terribly ugly. They live in the cold regions to the north, where men should not go, but where the poorer tribes sometimes must, when there is no meat available in the fertile valleys to the south. There is so much moving meat in the great reindeer migrations that it is a good hunter's duty to follow them, and the Monsters be damned. The Monsters do not like the heat, which is why they make him work in the summer doing trifling tasks they could surely do for themselves, in the burning direct sun, hour after day after week after month. But not after year. No man lasts more than a year. The Monsters feed men up on spe-



cial food, not the food the Monsters eat themselves, and work the men hard to muscle them up, and then –

Then is a thing that Adam prefers not to think about.

But the special food has been infrequent of late, and his stomach is not simply rumbling, but is twisting like a wrung rag. He knows he is getting weak, and he knows that those among the Monsters' prisoners who are weak enough to die also get removed, just as do those prisoners who are strong enough to fatten, and get fed to the Monsters' poorer families.

The Monsters do have families. Their children grow teeth very young.

He must do something, or he will die. Looking around him, he sees the same gaunt desperation in the eyes of every true man and woman he sees. They are looking at each other as if at walking food cakes, which after all, he realizes with an interior shrug, are really what they are.

He is fastening a smashed-out skull to the top of a post on the territory border. The skull is the skull of a man just like himself; it is a warning.

#### MONSTER TERRITORY. STAY AWAY.

The bottom of the brainpan has been smashed out, using incredible strength, both in order to get at the delectable brain inside, and to allow a border post to be shoved up inside the head after the skull is finished with. The skull is being fastened on to the post using catgut that the Monsters cannot make themselves, cut from a dead cow's belly using reindeer horn tools the Monsters cannot make themselves.

He is holding just such a tool of reindeer horn. It is very sharp, and will cut flesh – even Monster flesh.

There is a guard on his group, an immense guard, jut-jawed, long-nosed, hairy, like a man whose head grows beneath his shoulders; but a guard with his back to him.

There is a woman, banging a border post in with a porphyritic granite hammer stone, on the other side of the path. It is her duty to be thrown into the men's tent every now and again and produce more slaves. Sometimes it is frantic slaves who rape her, sometimes it is bored guards who do; it does not matter. The slave strain always breeds true. During the rape process, he has been amused to note that the Monsters' penises are actually smaller than a real human's, although their balls are titanic in size.

She looks at him, and moves her eyes pointedly toward the guard, hefting the hammer stone in her hands, then shifts her eyes back towards him again. The desperation of hunger is in her eyes as well.

Call her Eve.



**Dominic Green**, an *Interzone* discovery of some years ago, lives in Northampton. His last four stories here were "That Thing Over There" (IZ 132), which was taken by U.S. editor David Hartwell for reprinting in his best-of-the-year anthology, "Dream Blue Murder" (IZ 145), "Something Chronic" (IZ 159) and "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (IZ 162).

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One night, seeing that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) had just started on television, I immediately sat down to watch – because *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is one of those classic movies you should watch whenever it's available, as it always offers something new to notice and appreciate. This time, I noticed that when Klaatu describes his journey, he specifies that the distance from his home planet to Earth was “250 million of your miles.” He even repeats the figure.

Since aliens are rarely so definite about such matters, I wondered where a journey of 250 million miles to Earth might have begun. There was only one answer: Mars. When Earth and Mars are in opposition, they are 234 million miles apart, close to the stated distance. Venus and Mercury are always much less distant; Jupiter and the other planets are much farther away.

Other possibilities? Klaatu couldn't come from a tiny asteroid, and the only place to conceal a nearby body of planetary dimensions is in Earth's orbit, directly opposite Earth behind the Sun – the “Counter-Earth” of John Norman's *Gor*, the film *Journey to the Far Side of the Sun* (1969), and other undistinguished epics. Yet journeys from Counter-Earth to Earth, even with a generous swing around the Sun, would take little more than 200 million miles. Further, if Klaatu comes from a planet nobody on Earth has heard of, why does he bother to be so coy about his home? When asked “where it is you come from,” he answers vaguely, “From another planet. Let's just say we're neighbours.” A Klaatu from an unknown world could have given a more frank but equally uncommunicative response like “I come from the planet Zahgon.”

The more I pondered the issue, the clearer it seemed: though for some reason unwilling to disclose his true identity, Klaatu had to be a Martian.

Seeking more evidence to support the idea, I read the Harry Bates story that inspired the film, “Farewell to the Master,” but it provided no help, since the story's alien vessel arrives on Earth by means of teleportation, not space travel, and Klaatu and Gnut (Bates's name for Klaatu's robot companion, thankfully changed to Gort in the film) are from another solar system. Reading the film's script reminded me of other clues, including the line about neighbours (Venus and Mars are the only planets that can be termed Earth's neighbours) and the newspaper headline “MAN FROM MARS' ESCAPES FROM ARMY HOSPITAL!” And while the lines aren't in the script, a radio announcer in the film speculates that Klaatu comes from either Venus or Mars.

## “Martians Old and New, Still Standing Over Us”

Gary Westfahl

To see if the theory had emerged in the critical literature surrounding *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, I put the question to a young science fiction scholar studying 1950s films (yes, that young science fiction scholar, inexplicably still on speaking terms with me after reading *Interzone* No. 147). While I was told that the idea hadn't arisen, my “scientific” evidence to support Klaatu's Martian origins wasn't necessarily strong, from that scholar's perspective, since students of these films quickly learn that the facts and figures thrown out therein are often meaningless or unreliable – which is true enough, as in the movie we argued about, *This Island Earth* (1955), with its comets turning into planets and planets turning into suns.

Still, if a lazy screenwriter was randomly concocting an impressively large number, one would expect something more rounded – “a hundred billion miles” or “a million light years.” “250 million miles” wasn't a figure someone would come up with out of the blue. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was also striving to be a class act, and though screenwriter Edmund North isn't noted for science fiction films – his only other genre credit is *Meteor* (1979) – he was manifestly a diligent craftsperson who might actually pick up a science book to strengthen his script with accurate information.

Yet if North, director Robert Wise, or others working on the film envisioned Klaatu as a Martian, why wasn't that openly acknowledged? Perhaps it seemed appropriate following the internal logic of the story. Klaatu explains that his people had learned Earth's languages by “moni-

toring your radio broadcasts for a good many years,” so they had surely heard the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* and the anti-Martian panic that ensued, making it advisable for them to avoid mentioning Mars while on Earth. Klaatu also emphasizes that he represents not just one world but a federation of worlds dedicated to suppressing interplanetary violence – “A sort of United Nations on the Planetary level.” Identifying himself as a Martian might have led people to interpret his mission more narrowly, and more negatively, as Mars's effort to conquer Earth. Alternately, one might consider the external logic of film producers who wanted to market a serious science fiction film during a time when shoddy productions like *Rocketship X-M* (1950), *Flying Disc Man from Mars* (1951), and *Flight to Mars* (1951) were giving the Red Planet a bad name. Removing references to “Mars” may have seemed a necessary way to preserve one's dignity amidst the inanity.

Discounting appeals to textual evidence and logic, however, I have accepted Klaatu as a Martian, and have added *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to my bibliography of science fiction works involving Mars, primarily due to his actions: he comes to Earth, observes our behaviour, and delivers a stern lecture about why we need to mend our foolish, evil ways. That is, he does what Martians generally do.

It began with Percival Lowell, who prominently theorized in the late 19th century that Mars was home to an advanced civilization, much older than ours, capable of constructing innumerable and vast canals to bring water to thirsty Martians throughout a desiccating world (but not of devising more practical solutions, like relocating Martians to where the water was). As I recently discussed in an article for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Lowell's ideas engendered a rich literary tradition of Martians who act like parents – sometimes implacably evil (like H.G. Wells's invaders in *The War of the Worlds*), sometimes fading into senescence and in need of energetic human assistance (like Edgar Rice Burroughs's Barsoomians), but most frequently older, wiser beings who look down on humans as childish savages. It is a ubiquitous trope in science fiction, ranging from the high-tech Martian utopia of Hugo Gernsback's *Baron Munchausen's Scientific Adventures* to the virtuous, unfallen Martians of C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* and the enigmatically powerful Martians of Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

It is a tradition that Klaatu fits into quite nicely. While critics focus on

Klaatu as a Christ figure (he calls himself Mr Carpenter, he dies for our sins and is reborn, etc.), he actually seems more of a father figure: actor Michael Rennie looks the part, with his grey hair and dignified bearing, and we learn that Klaatu is rather elderly, in fact 78 years old (so he was born in 1873, around the time when Giovanni Schiaparelli's apparent discovery of Martian "canali" led to the birth of Lowell's theories – an intriguing coincidence). While Klaatu declines to romance the widowed Helen Benson to become her surrogate husband, he embraces the role of surrogate father to her son, escorting the lad around Washington D.C. and praising the words of another fatherly figure, Abraham Lincoln, engraved in the Lincoln Memorial. But the way Klaatu discusses our backwards Earth, in contrast to his progressive home world, best reveals his Martian heritage: "I don't intend to add my contribution to your childish jealousies and suspicions." "I am impatient with stupidity. My people have learned to live without it." "Your mutual fears and suspicions are merely the normal reactions of a primitive society." It is the voice of adult experience, familiar to teenagers everywhere, hectoring heedless youth about their lamentable immaturity.

It is a voice that reverberated through science fiction for many decades, until scientific evidence demonstrated beyond doubt that Mars could not be the home of an ancient, parental civilization. Yet traditions die hard, and we may now be witnessing the rebirth of the tradition that Klaatu represents.

Recently, during two lengthy flights across the Pacific, I finally read Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*, completing his Martian trilogy. I had earlier enjoyed *Red Mars*, but was less pleased with its successors, and not simply because of the unpleasant environment where I read them.

Part of the problem is the classic sort of wheel-spinning that afflicts many trilogies: most of *Green Mars* is devoted to retelling the story of *Red Mars* – an attempted Martian revolution – with a happy ending this time; characters even remark on the similarities between unfolding events and previous events, reminding themselves (and perhaps their author) to do things differently this time. And with Martian independence established, *Blue Mars* is, despite its length, a novel without a narrative, as Robinson keeps trying to interest himself in various people and minor crises afflicting his developing Martian utopia, without much success, as he

desultorily decides to ignore this character, kill off that character, and take another look at that other character.

Also disturbing was the fact that these novels preach democracy but display a fascination with aristocracy. Even after the Martian population surpasses one billion, Robinson remains exclusively focused on the *de facto* royalty of Mars: the First Hundred colonists, along with their children and spouses, who remain alive indefinitely due to longevity treatments and keep dominating every sphere of Martian activity, whether it is the government or sporting events. The common people of Mars serve only as props, to cheer worshipfully whenever the saintly Nirgal visits their town or to be horribly misled by Jackie Boone's crude anti-immigrant rhetoric. To celebrate this elite class even more, Robinson methodically weeds out or reforms all of its bad apples: his intriguingly flawed characters, John Boone and Frank Chalmers, are killed off in *Red Mars*; his scoundrels are removed – Phyllis Boyle by assassination, second-generation Jackie by exile to another planet; and his formerly disruptive and confrontational Ann Claiborne and Maya Toitovna are allowed to mellow into pleasant, agreeable folks. To fill the void left by Boone's and Chalmers's departures, *Green Mars* adds boring new characters who are too good to be true: the second-generation Nirgal, absolutely incapable of harbouring an evil thought, and Art Randolph, who is dispatched to Mars by a visionary billionaire to help the Martians solve all their problems and proceeds to do so with unfailing charm and kindness. (I longed for a plot twist that would reveal Art as an evil agent of Earth's despised multinational corporations, insinuating himself into Mars's inner circle only to betray them all; unfortunately, although that is the only logical explanation for his unbelievable benevolence, Art turns out to be what he pretends to be, eventually marrying one of the First Hundred to officially join the Elect.)

But Stan Robinson is both an industrious and intelligent writer; why would he allow his meticulously crafted and compelling story to devolve into a dull tableau of plastic paragons? The answer, I believe, is that he was writing about Martians. And Martians, a deeply rooted tradition whispers in an author's ears, are older and wiser than mere humans. So, even though Robinson's Martians are children of Earth, he felt obliged to somehow create out of them an assemblage of beings who are preternaturally mature and sagacious – so that later, when Earth dissolves into chaos due to environmental disaster, a

team of those Martians can visit Earth to offer assistance, again serving as experienced mentors and harsh critics of primitive human civilization.

It is telling that, as a trilogy that visibly struggled to be multicultural approaches its conclusion, Robinson repeatedly likens his Martian civilization to a standard Western model for idealized super-scientific cultures: ancient Greece. Buildings "devoted to the island's olympiads... had a consciously Greek look," and marathon runners race in the nude, like Greek Olympians. Evocative Greek place names keep cropping up – Elysium, Hellas, Hellespontus, Aegean, Acheron, Olympus. There are references to a 21st-century "Professor Athens" and statements like "as if the ancient Greeks by introspection alone had intuited the very geometry of timespace" and "The island slipped under the horizon like a dream of ancient Greece." Maya's theatre group performs Greek tragedies, and she notices "a connection to the ancient Greeks... being made in any number of ways all around Hellas Basin... a neoclassicism that Maya felt was good for them all, as they confronted and tried to measure up to the Greeks' great honesty, their unflinching look at reality." One starts to imagine Robinson's exemplary Martians wearing togas, like the majestic future denizens of the film *Things to Come* (1936).

Despite such infelicities, one must acknowledge Robinson's trilogy as a monumental achievement. Earlier writers, after all, could simply have people stumble upon an older, wiser Martian civilization; Robinson had to build his older, wiser Martian civilization from scratch, beginning with only a small band of settlers from Earth. And, given Robinson's familiarity with and commitment to the literature and traditions of science fiction, it is predictable that his creative energies would increasingly follow a well-trodden path.

In *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, I posited that the new outpouring of novels about terraforming Mars might engender a third Martian paradigm, a reinhabited Mars, to replace Lowell's inhabited Mars and the uninhabited Mars of contemporary science. After reading Robinson's novels, however, I now suspect that science fiction may simply be returning to the original paradigm, the difference being that now, the awesome parental Martians who tower over mere humans and upbraid us for our follies will be our own descendants, transformed by the experience of Martian life into superior beings. Klaatu is coming back to Earth, and this time, he will be one of us.

Gary Westfahl

Way back when, when the Moon was yet unsullied, when the map of the world was still touched in places with the dominant red of Britain's Empire, when everyone knew their place and television had only two channels that closed down each night with the National Anthem, not *that* long ago, let's face it, education was founded on unshakeable and unchangeable certainties. There were the fixed stars of the literary canon; the ineluctable truths of science pointing towards a boundlessly optimistic future of endless innovation; and history's great stories of Kings and Queens and Great Men, simple and clear and written not in water but in stone.

We know better now, of course. We know that literature is far more than a few mountain peaks carved into the likenesses of dead white males; that science is in constant flux, evolving by fits and starts; and that history is a story written by the winners, a simplified scrim over a restless mass of folk memory, the intricate web of commerce and popular culture, personal letters, suppressed or lost documents, and the plain unknowable. We know now that events played out right before our eyes can quickly sink into a morass of contradictory conspiracies, that even simple questions – one gunman or two? – can never be answered; not because there is no answer, but because there are so many. We know how delicately balanced history is, and how easily it can be changed – there's a whole literature of alternate histories devoted to playing with the consequences of lost nails and shoeless horses.

Tim Powers's fantasy novels are very much of the many-worlds theory of history: their gorgeous riffs, deeply permeated by the supernatural, play on the tangled conspiracies of secret histories underlying and interpenetrating quotidian certainty. *Declare* (Morrow, \$25) is his best to date, big, knotty and densely imagined, presenting a fantastical alternate exegesis of the Cold War through the smoke and mirrors of espionage.

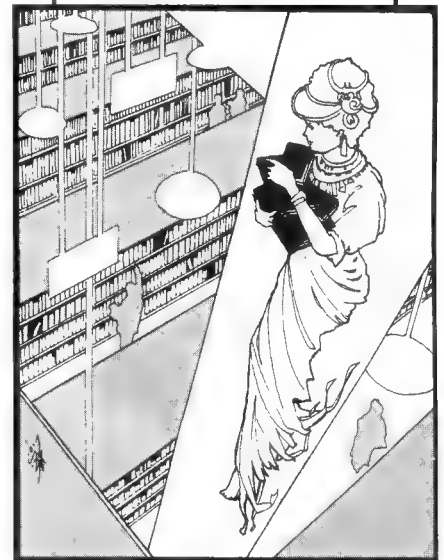
It's the story of Andrew Hale, a British academic drawn back into the secret service to complete a mission that ended in catastrophe 15 years ago. Shaped as an agent since childhood, Hale learned his craft while infiltrating a Soviet spy ring in Nazi-occupied Paris, where he fell in love with the Communist agent Elena Ceniza-Bendiga, and afterwards first met the man whose fate is mysteriously linked to his, double-agent and traitor Kim Philby. In 1948, Philby and Hale were involved in Operation Declare, an assault on strange forces that inhabit Mount Ararat. Now Hale must revive the aborted operation and break the supernatural alliance the

## Conspiracy Theory

Paul McAuley

Soviets have made, and so determine the outcome of the Cold War.

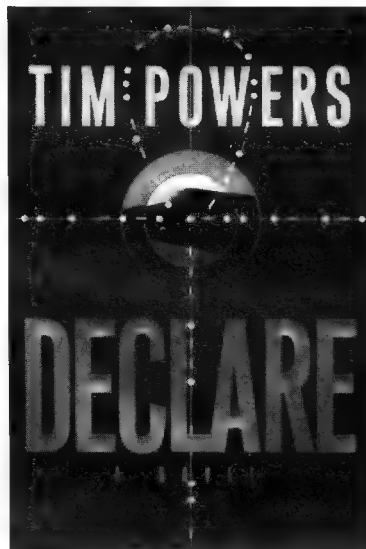
Like all of Powers's heroes, Hale is an unwitting instrument of higher powers, a corrupted innocent who sets upon his preordained task with resignation, and who must riddle the secret of his past to survive his ordeal and redeem himself. The first part of *Declare*, telling of Hale's entry into the Great Game, the first spark of his redemptive love for Elena, and of his reluctant re-entry into Operation Declare, are a superb sustained and overt homage to the Cold War novels of John le Carré; it is not until page 184 of this long novel that the first overt manifestation of the supernatural motor behind the mundane plot finally erupts. For Operation Declare is nothing less than a war against a clutch of fallen angels, or Djinn, that inhabit the upper reaches of Mount Ararat; the secret protector of the



REVIEWED

Soviets is a captured Djinn bound by ritual to the boundaries of the Communist empire. And while Hale has been shaped as the weapon to destroy the Djinn, Philby, his nemesis, plots to become a rafiq, a human emissary embodying their powers.

This supernatural secret history recalls that of one of Powers's earlier novels, *The Stress of Her Regard*, in which the Romantic poets were involved in a covert war against the lamia, silicon creatures with malevolent intent towards humanity. Like the hero of that novel, Hale is wedded in spirit to forces only he can destroy, and is a reluctant recruit to a struggle played out in the interstices of documented history. But *Declare* differs from Powers's earlier novels in that the supernatural element is never allowed to dominate the narrative. The detailed and atmospheric invocation of the shadowy tradecraft, shifting loyalties and dreary uncertainties of Cold War espionage, and the portrait of the desperate irresolution and bitter self-knowledge of the traitorous Kim Philby, are very finely realized, solid anchors for the intricately detailed fantastic elements. Within the framework of the known history of the doomed romantics of the Cold War, Powers deploys a plethora of inventively revitalized pulp tropes, from lost scrolls discovered by Lawrence of Arabia, to the grail of immortality; postulates contextually plausible alternate explanations for the very real mysteries surrounding Philby's life; and weaves historical and transcendental events into a single gorgeous tapestry. It's a significant achievement by a major author of modern fantasy, and highly recommended.

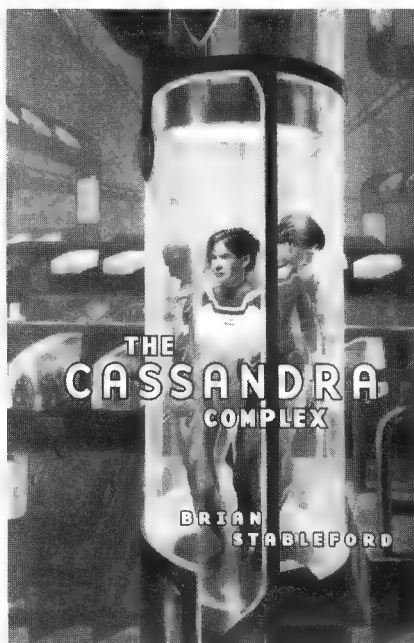




If science fiction is defined solely as a literature of ideas, then many of Brian Stableford's novels and short stories could stand as exemplars of the art. Stableford dramatizes, dissects and extrapolates his themes with admirable clarity, rigour, and no little sardonic wit, and wrings surprising and always interesting twists from his premises.

His latest novel, *The Cassandra Complex* (Tor, \$23.95), based on a short story, "The Magic Bullet" (*Interzone* 29), is a prequel to a trilogy (*Inherit the Earth, Architects of Emortality* and *The Fountains of Youth*) that explored a future increasing shaped by biotechnology in general, and by human emortality – greatly extended lifespans without the supernatural invulnerability of gods or superheroes – in particular. It kicks off when Lisa Freiman, a forensic researcher nearing retirement, wakes one night to find intruders in her flat. They are no ordinary burglars; they steal only Lisa's hoard of computer files, and spray-paint a single word, "Traitor," on her door. Lisa quickly learns that the burglary was part of a terrorist operation. Her erstwhile lover, the scientist Morgan Miller, has been abducted, and Mouseworld, a famous long-standing experiment in mouse population dynamics on which both Lisa and Morgan Miller once worked, has been torched, and she is soon embroiled with the Ministry of Defence and an interlocking network of radical feminists as she tries to find out who kidnapped Morgan Miller, and to understand the nature of his revolutionary discovery.

*The Cassandra Complex* nicely inverts genre expectations by casting as its protagonist a 60-year-old woman whose experience and caution are more useful than the grit and big guns of less carefully created heroines. There are some fine, unexpected revelations in the final scenes, and ominous forecasts of what will be unleashed in the long-awaited biowar (and, presumably, the forthcoming sequel to *The Cassandra Complex*) to which the world is resigned. Like all prequels, it is constricted by the need to fit into a history whose future is already mapped, and while the first three novels in the sequence play out against a grand backdrop of history stretching all the way to the 31st century, the compass of *The Cassandra Complex* is much smaller, although the problems with which its protagonist grapples are no less urgent. More seriously, the future of this resolutely traditional sf novel seems little more than a stage set reduced to the essentials necessary for the conflict between pro- and anti-biotech factions, which is mostly rendered in long stretches of stagi-ly formal dialogue. As a result,



like all too many overly didactic novels, *The Cassandra Complex* never really comes to life; its play of ideas seems to take place in a milieu as artificial and as stiflingly hermetic as any mouse cage.

If it's future-shock complexity you want, then you should take a look at the *Transmetropolitan* comic-book series (all published by the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics, prices between £7.99 – £10.99), written by Warren Ellis and pencilled by Darick Robertson. This ultra-noir satire, set in a future transformed by biotechnology, nanotechnology and plentiful energy, is centred on the career of outlaw journalist Spider Jerusalem, a heavily tattooed, drug-addled avatar of Hunter S. Thompson, a post-cyberpunk reinvention of the tough guy with a heart of gold.

In the first collected volume, *Back on the Street*, Spider Jerusalem finds himself unable to complete a two-book contract in his self-imposed rural exile, and must return for inspiration to the nameless, hyperkinetic city he loathes but helplessly loves, encountering along the way hypocrisy on both sides of a rebellion by Transients, humans infused with alien genes, against the powers-that-be. The vignettes in the second volume, *Lust for Life*, give some idea of the imaginative density invested in Warren's and Robertson's depiction of a metropolis that's a mutant cross between Jack Womack's *Ambient New York* and William Gibson's *Sprawl*, in which obscene wealth rubs shoulders with every kind of abject poverty, talking dogs police streets populated by posthuman werewolves and nanotech foglets, and something's always exploding somewhere or other. Ellis is one of sf comics' most inventive writ-

ers, and his hyperkinetic, polymorphously perverse future, a vigorous dystopia that could be the best we could hope for, is perfectly conveyed by Robertson's crammed, jagged and overlapping frames.

*Year of the Bastard* and *The New Scum* settle down to a more straightforward narrative, in which Spider Jerusalem and his two sidekicks become involved in the election of the next President, a choice between the incumbent blue-collar thug and an apparently squeaky clean Senator whose fixed smile masks a monstrous contempt for those he calls "The New Scum" – Spider Jerusalem's natural constituency. While the story, with its rather mechanical twists, doesn't quite overcome the problem of satirizing American politics in the era of spinmeister Clinton and "President" Bush, Spider Jerusalem's scatological, acerbic, scabrously funny and relentlessly energetic voice carries it through to a slingshot conclusion where the election is won and Spider Jerusalem declares war on the winner, who has already declared war on him. Goody goody, we say, and hope for fireworks.

Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (Canongate, £6.99) is a bleak yet moving fable of exploitation and alienation hung upon an unabashed science-fictional trope I can't reveal without spoiling the story. Faber's weird twist on factory-farming ethics, a kind of inverted *Island of Doctor Moreau*, convinces by precise observation of its bleak landscapes, carefully paced revelations of gruesome secrets, and the subtle and skilful depiction of the novel's eccentric main character, Isserly, who spends her days driving back and forth along the roads of the Scottish Highlands, searching for well-muscled male hitchhikers with no attachments, returning with suitable candidates to the isolated farm where her companions can start their grisly work.

Hostile and resentful, bewildered by the low comedy of the strange world she must negotiate, painfully scarred and mutilated, Isserly is redeemed only by her dedication to her work. Then the owner's son makes an unexpected visit, and she is forced to reconsider not only what is being done to her victims, but also what has been done to her. With its Scottish setting, its dark, edgy and often violent comedy, and the confused identity of its central character, it's tempting to compare Faber's first novel with that of Iain Banks, but Faber's spare, lyrical sentences, the cat-and-mouse tension of Isserly's hunts, and the mutual incomprehension of characters conveyed through sharply pared dialogue, lift *Under the Skin* into a class of its own.

Paul McAuley

Molly Brown's first short-story collection, *Bad Timing* (Big Engine, £8.99), is a blast: an effervescent mix of comedy, horror, and sheer weirdness, much of it first published right here in the pages of *Interzone*. When Brown gets dark, she gets very dark indeed: "Feeding Julie" gave me the creeps, and there's a nasty, bleak undercurrent to stories such as "Community Service" and "The Psychomantium." A cop just wants to do her job and nail terrorists, so why can't she seem to remember things properly? A woman has a vision of a hanged girl; a prostitute thinks she's found her knight in shining armour; a girl on a first date gets the promise of movie stardom – or does she? There are some eerie twists and turns in this anthology, which also takes a few leaps into the sunny uplands of sheer amusement. "The Vengeance of Grandmother Wu" is a pretty scary tale, but it's also hilarious. So are the vignettes of psycho-princess Ruella; surely the teenage pin-up of upper-class sociopaths everywhere.

Molly Brown's strength lies in this ability to shift mood. As well as the

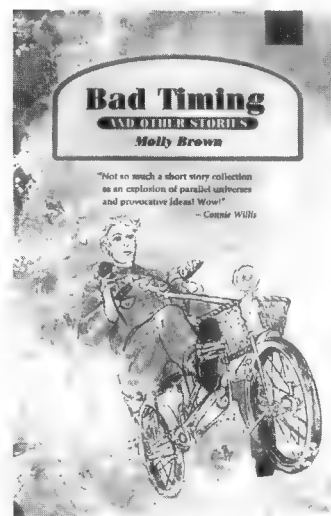
## It's All in the Timing

Liz Williams

downbeat, *noir*-ish pieces here, and the lighter numbers there are several stories that should appeal as much to the mainstream readership as to a genre audience. I can see stories such as "Bad Timing," "Star," "Choosing the Incubus" and "Agents of Darkness" going down well with the Candice Bushnell/Tama Janowitz-reading crowd, so if you have a friend who's currently enamoured of Bridget Jonesesque thirty-whatever fiction and you want to seduce them to the sf/fantasy side of the force with something different (and a lot better), then this collection would be a good starting place.

It's an excellent gathering, and it would make a great birthday or Christmas present. This is one of the first in a series of Big Engine productions, published by Ben Jeapes, and if it is a representative volume then it bodes well for the future of this new book line.

Liz Williams



The quest to protect established society against a supernatural threat is a familiar fantasy theme and one which is common to each of the novels in this review.

In *The Nameless Day* (Voyager, £11.99), part one of her "Crucible" trilogy, Sara Douglass leads us into an alternative 14th century convulsed, like the real one, by war, famine and plague. Her contention is that the medieval, "spiritual" world was swept away by these convulsions to make way for one based on "secularism and materialism." But she offers a medieval explanation for that change, couched in terms of a fight between Angels and Demons.

One of the strengths of the book is its lead character. Thomas Neville is a former noble who has turned to the church after he put a former lover, pregnant with his child, to death. Yet any contrition he feels is undermined by his arrogance; we meet him in Rome where he has been dispatched after a tangle with his English superiors. On arrival, he proceeds to antagonize the Prior of his new abbey.

Yet Thomas is the one who is charged with the recovery of a book of power, whose loss has meant that several "demon children" now walk the Earth. But Thomas has several demons of his own which he must deal with as he tries to complete his task.

Thomas despises women, despite – or because of – his attraction to them. Yet this misogynistic character is chosen by the archangel Michael to complete a quest to save God's order on Earth. St Michael himself appears to

## Angels & Demons

Matt Colborn

regard women as chattels, to be used and thrown aside. It is a demon, who, later in the book, chastises Thomas for his abuse of women!

This sort of ambiguity is one of Douglass's chief concerns. As Thomas travels through Germany, and then war-torn France, he encounters several social revolutionaries, who harbour what he sees as demon-inspired ideas about the overturning of the social order. Etienne Marcel, a Merchant in Paris, advocates a sort of proto-socialism. John Ball's ideas prefigure Martin Luther's priesthood of all believers. Thomas sees these notions as evil; but to us, many of the revolutionaries offer fair criticisms of medieval society.

But we cannot entirely reject Thomas's quest. The demons are capable of evil; in one of the nastiest scenes in the book, they kill the senile Edward III, thereby allowing the possibly demon-inspired Richard II on the throne. And during his trip through

war-torn France, Thomas witnesses some of the terrible consequences of the disintegration of the old social order. Thomas himself, despite his faults, is shown to have many qualities.

If the book has a fault, it lies in its occasionally questionable historical plausibility. Douglass's presentation of the period sometimes forces slightly anachronistic outlooks on her characters. Her revolutionaries occasionally sound as if they are living the 18th century rather than the 14.

Sometimes, too, overt anachronisms creep in. Some are apparently accidental; Edward III's son is constantly referred to as "the Black Prince," but this nickname was not a contemporary one. Others are deliberate. For example, Joan of Arc appears on the scene decades early. It's perfectly acceptable to do this – but the more that conventional history is distorted, the more difficult it is to relate the novel's happenings to those in our own world.

At the volume's end, we are left aware – apparently more than Thomas is – of the ambiguity of his quest, and of the questionable motives of both "sides" involved in the supernatural conflict. Excellent fuel for the next volume!

**Carol Berg's Transformation** (Orbit, £9.99) is both a traditional fantasy and an intriguing character piece. The book splits quite neatly into two halves – the first concerning the relationship between a noble and his slave, and the second being, once more, the story of a fight against demons. The "fantasy" half is well told

and concerns the infiltration of the Derzhi Empire by "Demons" from the north, who work by possessing human agents. Berg's demons have none of the ambiguity of Douglass's creations; instead, her novel is made memorable by its characters.

The book is narrated by a slave – Seyonne – who becomes the scribe of the prince of the Derzhis, Aleksander. Seyonne was enslaved during an invasion of his homeland, Ezzaria, when the Derzhis massacred most of the population. He has every reason to hate the crown prince, who, apart from being a member of the race who enslaved Seyonne's people, is spoilt, arrogant and dangerous. And yet, Seyonne finds himself taking on the role of Aleksander's protector.

What is unusual about this work is that Berg does not flinch from showing us the downside of Derzhi society. The first chapters of *Transformation* clearly show us what it is like to be a slave under the Derzhis. Seyonne is branded on the face, he is regularly beaten and he is imprisoned for days in a hole in the ground. At the feasts, the younger slaves are forced to whore for the guests. And Aleksander, at least at first, does not hesitate to punish Seyonne if he suspects that he is even thinking out of turn.

Then we discover that the Derzhi Empire is being threatened by the demons. Having been shown so much of the brutality of the Derzhis, it is initially difficult to be sympathetic to their plight. It is only later in the book, when Aleksander is forced into exile because of a demon curse, taking Seyonne with him, that the more positive aspects of the Empire get discussed. But these seem rather distant, abstract considerations. Aleksander himself has become our reason to care about the "Empire."

For Berg's book is about Aleksander's transformation from a childish bully into a kind, brave and considerate man – and this is handled wonderfully plausibly. Aleksander is at first suspicious of Seyonne's attempts to protect him from demonkind – but as the stakes are raised, we are shown that, cruel though he is, Aleksander has enough self-knowledge to facilitate his salvation. This self-knowledge also lends him more sophistication than most "heroes."

*Transformation* also refers to Seyonne's change from slave back to sorcerer. Along the way, he must deal with personal crises from his past, as well as with tremendous suffering in his present. But his relationship with Aleksander never leaves centre stage, and indeed gains in fascination as the pair increasingly come to depend on one another to survive.

I only hope Berg can keep this level of characterization up for two more volumes. If she didn't, it would be a

shame, for whilst sticking to an established fantasy formula, Berg has had the courage to address what it might really be like to live in such a feudal society. Such hierarchies are too often uncritically depicted in fantasy novels. As it is, a superbly entertaining book!

Tim Lebbon's short stories also deal with demons – but they tend to be of a more personal variety. *As the Sun Goes Down* (Night Shade Books, \$25) collects 15 of Lebbon's horror stories, half of which are original to the collection. Lebbon's demons are of varied form and differing degrees of objectivity, but they often reflect some flaw in the protagonists, or in their lives.

The opening story, "The Empty Room," concerns the failure of a boy to help a friend stuck in the basement of a ruined house. The trapped boy cries for help, claiming that some horror whispers to him. His desperate protests highlight the casual immorality of his potential rescuer. It's a terrific study of moral delusion.

"Dust" features an obese man in a crashed spaceship, who has been trapped in a room so that his companions can save the food supplies for themselves. His plight is worsened by the mental torture they inflict and their sexual taunts, but ironically, his isolation proves to be his salvation. Perhaps social exclusion is not always a bad thing.

"Fell Swoop" and "The Unfortunate" feature men who are toyed with by cruel, supernatural beings. In "Fell Swoop," the being is a perfect reflection of a man who has made a complete mess of his life. The being perhaps represents regret. In "The Unfortunate," entities called the Amaranth save the victim of an aeroplane crash, bestowing good luck upon him. The only thing they ask in return is that he believe in them. As with most of these gifts, the Amaranth's turns out to be a double-edged sword. Both the stories are well told, but are rather familiar horror fare.

"King of the Dead" seems almost out of place in a collection of modern-styled horror; it recalls the fantasy style of a 1930s pulp weird tale. It is also exotically nasty.

But the most effective of Lebbon's stories are those which concern personal tragedy. "Life Within" is about a little boy who realizes that his father has drowned some puppies, because he has a telepathic link with the unfortunates. "The Butterfly" concerns the cruelty of a mother to her own child, and the – sometimes fatal – indifference of many to the forces of nature. A personal favourite is "Endangered Species in E-minor," where a homeless man, the last of his line, learns the doctrine of "survival of the fittest" at a zoo.

Several of Lebbon's tales recall those of earlier writers; some could almost have been Ramsey Campbell stories. But these "family resemblances" are perhaps due to the constraints of the horror genre, rather than any lack of talent on Lebbon's part. In all, a good collection.

Chris Wooding's *The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray* (Scholastic, £12.99) is an entertaining steampunk supernatural adventure, let down at times by clumsy writing. It is set early in an alternate 20th century, some years after the Germans have bombed London from airships. The atmosphere of the book is, however, Victorian and Wooding utilizes many standard props familiar from that era in the telling of his story. Hansoms clatter along cobbled roads, the city is perpetually foggy, there is a society of beggars and a Jack-the-Ripper-style serial killer named Stitch-face. Some of the characters are pure Victoriana, too; from Dr Mammon Pyke, the deviant administrator of a lunatic asylum, to Alaizabel Cray herself, who is an archetypal late-Victorian heroine.

Into this mix are injected some very Lovecraftian Wych-kin and their hunters. The latter are primarily represented by the 17-year-old Thaniel Fox, who seems to be modelled on a modern-day "goth" and somewhat out of place in an alternate "Victorian" London. Early on, Alaizabel Cray comes under Fox's protection. She has been possessed by the spirit of a foul old lady who has been summoned by a secret society to conjure some elder gods.

Wooding is a natural story-teller. His story is sufficiently exciting to sweep you along in its telling. His characters, too, engage, and the world he has created, whilst a bit of a Frankenstein's monster of influences, is suitably atmospheric for the story that he wishes to tell. In creating this atmosphere, Wooding frequently uses somewhat flowery language and although this can be successful, it can also get in the way of the narrative flow.

Nowhere is this more evident than the first two or three chapters. Some of the sentences are very clunky, and others are overwritten. Some of them, too, comes across as rather clichéd – how often does a Cradlejack "gibber?" In places Wooding seems, again, rather too heavily imitative of Lovecraft. Lack of a sense of engagement early on can be fatal, because many people – this reviewer almost included – might be tempted to give up before the story really starts. This wouldn't matter if Wooding hadn't got what is basically a very good story to tell – because once the narrative gets going, the novel is entertaining and even, at times, compulsive.

Matt Colborn

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anders, Lou, ed. **Outside the Box: The Best Short Fiction from Bookface.com.** Wildside Press [PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, USA], ISBN 1-58715-283-5, 286pp, trade paperback, cover by John Pica-cio, no price shown. (Sf/horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 18 stories, many of them first published electronically on the now-defunct "Bookface" website, by Paul Cornell, John Grant, Brian Hodge, Graham Joyce, Kate Orman, J. Michael Straczyn-ski, and others less well known; this is one of numerous titles, most of which we don't see, published by Wildside Press, a "print on demand" company which produces quite attractive books; see their website at [www.wildsidepress.com](http://www.wildsidepress.com).) *Late entry: January publication, received in April 2001.*

Baxendale, Trevor. **Eater of Wasps.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53832-5, 280pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) *May 2001.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Icebones: Mammoth, Book Three.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07214-8, 278pp, C-format paperback, cover by Peter Barrett, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; last in the trilogy which tells the story of the mammoths from the animals' point of view.) *19th April 2001.*

Bear, Greg. **Blood Music.** "SF Masterworks, 40." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-762-4, 262pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; this was the book which put Bear on the sf map, expanded from his original Hugo-and-Nebula Award-winning novella version.) *12th April 2001.*

Bear, Greg. **Rogue Planet.** "Star Wars." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941030-3, 341pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2000; it seems Mr Bear will turn his hand to anything, in this case a novel about the boy-hood exploits of George Lucas's space-opera character Annakin Skywalker; it's dedicated to, among others, "Jack, and Ed, and Doc Smith," which shows the right spirit.) *10th May 2001.*

Bonansinga, Jay R. **Oblivion.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-37611-X, 309pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; apparently there was a Macmillan hardcover of this one last year, but we didn't see it.) *11th May 2001.*

Bradley, Marion Zimmer, and Diana L. Paxson. **Priestess of Avalon.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648376-3, xiii+382pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paula Lewis, £6.99. (His-torical fantasy novel, first published in the

USA [?], 2000; the blurb states: "published posthumously, this spellbinding historical romance is the conclusion to the enchanting Avalon series.") *21st May 2001.*

Brown, Eric. **New York Nights: Book One in the Virex Trilogy.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-782-9, 327pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; the opener in a three-parter set in the USA 40 years hence, and involving virtual reality; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 161.) *2nd April 2001.*

Brown, Eric. **A Writer's Life.** Introduction by Paul Di Filippo. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-20-X, 78pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Julian Flynn, £8. (Horror/fantasy novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies.) *Late entry: March publication, received in April 2001.*

Brown, Fredric. **From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown.** Edited by Ben Yalow. Introduction by Barry N. Malzberg. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 1-886778-18-3, 693pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$29. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains all the fantastic short stories, over a hundred of them, and many of them short-shorts, by Fredric Brown [1906-1972] – who also wrote several sf novels and a considerable amount of crime fiction; this is the sort of commemorative volume NESFA [i.e. the New England SF Association] does well.) *Late entry: February publication, received in April 2001.*

Butler, Andrew M. **The Pocket Essential Terry Pratchett.** "Pocket Essentials Literature." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-39-0, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Read-ing guide to the humorous sf and fantasy of Terry Pratchett; first edition; by the same author as the Pocket Essentials booklets on *Cyberpunk* and *Philip K. Dick* [both published towards the end of last year], it's another lucid little guide – good value for money.) *10th May 2001.*

Byrne, Eugene. **Things Unborn.** Earthlight, 0-7434-0911-6, 421pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; Byrne's second novel, following *ThiGMOO* [1999], this one is set in an alternate near-future world where many of the dead have come back to life.) *19th April 2001.*

Campbell, Ramsey, ed. **Meddling with Ghosts: Stories in the Tradition of M. R. James.** The British Library, ISBN 0-7123-1125-4, x+287pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Ghost-story anthology, first edition; it's divided into several sections, headed "James's Precursors," "James's Contemporaries" and "James's Suc-cessors," and with an updated version of Rosemary's Pardoe's excellent bibliography, "The James Gang" [previously published as a small-press item], included as an appendix; authors represented, mostly with rarely-

## BOOKS RECEIVED

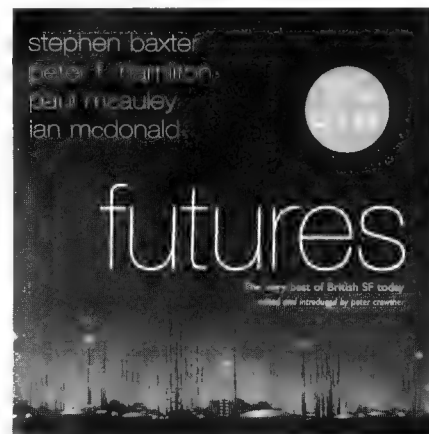


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reprinted stories, include J. Sheridan Le Fanu, F. Marion Crawford, Mary Cholmondeley, Sabine Baring-Gould, Perceval Landon, Fritz Leiber, L. T. C. Rolt, A. N. L. Munby, T. E. D. Klein and Terry Lamsley, among others; a valuable historical anthology – recom-mended.) *26th April 2001.*

Cole, Stephen. **Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Gods of the Under-world.** "Bernice Summerfield, 2." Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-23-8, 227pp, A-format paperback, cover by Carolyn Edwards, £6.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first edition; second in a new paperback-original series picking up from where Virgin Publishing's "New Adventures" left off; the character of Bernice Summer-field, an erstwhile companion of Doctor Who in the Virgin novels, was created by Paul Cornell.) *Late entry: January publication, received in April 2001.*

Crowther, Peter, ed. **Futures.** "The very best of British SF today." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07023-4, xii+320pp, hardcover, £12.99.







(Sf omnibus, first edition; a squarish small-format hardcover [wider than it's tall], this collects four notable novellas which were published separately last year as slim books by Crowther's small-press imprint, PS Publishing: *Reality Dust* by Stephen Baxter, *Watching Trees Grow* by Peter F. Hamilton, *Making History* by Paul McAuley and *Tendeleo's Story* by Ian McDonald; this edition drops the original introductions [by Greg Bear, Larry Niven, Michael Swanwick and Robert Silverberg] and adds a new one by the editor, Peter Crowther.) 19th April 2001.

Darvill-Evans, Peter. **Asylum**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53833-3, 254pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fourth Doctor and Nyssa, it's set in medieval Oxford, with Roger Bacon as a character, and there's an interesting historical afterword by the author.) May 2001.

Fisher, Catherine. **The Margrave**. "Volume 4 of the Book of the Crow." Red Fox, ISBN 0-09-940487-7, 250pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; this is the first of this Welsh author's books we have been sent, the concluding volume of a tetralogy which has gained praise; we have also received similarly-packaged Red Fox reissues of the three previous books, *The Relic Master* [1998], *The Interrex* [1999] and *Flain's Coronet* [2000] – all priced at £3.99.) May 2001.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Interlopers**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00847-X, 313pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jerry Vanderstelt, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; another of Foster's light adventure romps.) May 2001.

Frank, Jane. **The Art of Richard Powers**. Foreword by Vincent Di Fate. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-890-8, 128pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Powers, £20. (Sf art portfolio, first edition; Powers [1921-1996], who produced sf illustrations in a semi-abstract, quasi-surrealist style – completely unlike the photo-realism which is presently fashionable – was one of the most important American paperback-cover artists of the 1950s and 1960s; there are many fine examples of his work here, and the interesting text also includes a "Life" of the artist by his son, Richard Gid Powers, and an "Unpublished Interview"; an essential historical volume for those interested in sf book-cover art.) 24th May 2001.

Gambino, Fred. **Ground Zero**. Foreword by Dick Jude. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-891-6, 112pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Gambino, £20. (Sf art portfolio, first edition; in recent years, Fred Gambino seems to have become one of the "big three" of British sf book-cover illustration, along with Jim Burns and Chris Moore [hmm, that's a generalization which may provoke some disagreement]; this is his first volume of collected covers – excellent commercial work of its type.) 24th May 2001.

Garnett, David. **Space Wasters**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-012-1, 375pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Humorous

sf novel, first edition; a follow-up to *Bikini Planet* [2000], which was described by *Time Out* as "consummately silly.") 3rd May 2001.

Gerrold, David. **Bouncing Off the Moon**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87841-9, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Royo, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the "eagerly awaited sequel to *Jumping Off the Planet*" [2000], it's evidently a Heinlein-esque boys' book [or Young Adult novel, in today's polite speech].) 19th April 2001.

Gray, Muriel. **The Ancient**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-226314-3, 358pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Horror novel, first edition; this is Gray's third novel, and it comes with a commendation from Stephen King; the publishers describe their Glaswegian author as "a real renaissance woman; journalist, serious political commentator, music and arts reviewer, TV presenter and business woman," and, of course, "a superb fiction writer.") 8th May 2001.

Hayden, Patrick Nielsen, ed. **Starlight 3**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86780-8, 350pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; all-new stories by Stephen Baxter, Terry Bisson, Ted Chiang [although not a prolific writer, he seems to be a fixture in this series], Susannah Clarke, Brenda W. Clough, D. G. Compton, Cory Doctorow, Andy Duncan, Colin Greenland, Maureen F. McHugh, Geoffrey A. Landis, Susan Palwick, Jane Yolen and others.) May 2001.

Heinlein, Robert A. **The Fantasies of Robert A. Heinlein**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87557-6, 352pp, trade paperback, no price shown [circa \$15]. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1999; eight familiar stories, mostly from the 1940s, selected by David G. Hartwell to represent the more fantastic side of Heinlein's imagination; although the obvious items [mostly from *Unknown* magazine], such as the novellas "Magic, Inc." and "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag," are here, so are a few

stories usually accepted as sf rather than fantasy – "And He Built a Crooked House," "Waldo" and "All You Zombies"; perhaps this sort of repackaging is necessary in a time when science fiction has lost much of its charm in the public eye and fantasy rules the roost.) 20th April 2001.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Orphans of the Sky**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07237-7, 187pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1963; a revision of two linked novellas, "Universe" and "Common Sense," first published in *Astounding SF* in 1941, and, despite some pulp crudities, long regarded as a minor classic of American sf.) 19th April 2001.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Orphans of the Sky**. Stealth Press [336 College Ave., Lancaster, PA 17603, USA], ISBN 1-58881-007-0, 153pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1963; yes, it's yet another edition of the above old book, this one produced by a new "direct publishing" company in quite a classy hardcover format; see [www.stealthpress.com](http://www.stealthpress.com) for ordering information via the internet.) Late entry: January publication, received in April 2001.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Tunnel in the Sky**. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-6802-6, 239pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colligan, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1955; Heinlein seems to be busting out all over this month; this is one of his esteemed "juveniles" – or, not to mince words, boys' books [although no doubt enjoyed by many tomboyish girls too in their day] – which have inspired countless imitations [see under David Gerrold, above, for a current example]; it's a good idea for someone to reprint the originals for today's library trade.) 30th April 2001.

Holt, Tom. **Nothing But Blue Skies**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-040-7, 317pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Cemmick, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; it's about a dragon called Karen.) 3rd May 2001.

Holt, Tom. **Valhalla**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-042-3, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Cemmick, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 165.) 3rd May 2001.

Howard, Robert E. **The Conan Chronicles, Volume 2: The Hour of the Dragon**. Edited by Stephen Jones. "Fantasy Masterworks, 16." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-747-0, xii+575pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £7.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; it consists of the second half of the 21 "Conan" stories Howard wrote, with the texts reproduced in the original form, and here rearranged in internal chronological order; this is perhaps the most attractive repackaging of these old pulp stories yet in paperback form.) 26th April 2001.

Irvine, Ian. **Dark is the Moon: Volume Three of The View from the Mirror Quartet**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-038-5, xxii+674pp, A-format paperback, cover by



Mark Sofilas, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1998; the author was born in Australia in 1950, and has a PhD in marine sciences.) 3rd May 2001.

Joshi, S. T. **The Modern Weird Tale.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0986-X, x+278pp, trade paperback, \$34.95. (Critical study of selected modern horror writers; first edition; this is a sequel to Joshi's well-received volume, *The Weird Tale* [University of Texas Press, 1990], and, as such, a genuinely "long-awaited" book: parts of it first appeared in various critical journals up to a decade ago – e.g. the lengthy, debunking essay on Stephen King, which we first published in *Million* no. 13, Jan./Feb. 1993; other writers covered in depth here include Clive Barker, William Peter Blatty, Shirley Jackson, Ramsey Campbell, Robert Aickman, Anne Rice, Thomas Ligotti, Peter Straub, Thomas Tryon and T. E. D. Klein; although irritating to some, S[unand] T[rymbak] Joshi [born 1958], with his sometimes comically severe literary judgments, is one of the best critics the horror field has; recommended.) June 2001.

Lau, Miller. **Talisker: Book One of The Last Clansman.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0893-4, 498pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Miller Lau" is the pseudonym of a new British writer [female, "of Scottish descent"], and this is apparently a debut novel; David Gemmell commends it as "a startlingly good fantasy.") April 2001.

Mackay, Daniel. **The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art.** Foreword by Brooks McNamara. Afterword by Marshall Blonsky. McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0815-4, xiv+201pp, trade paperback, \$32. (Critical study, from an academic perspective, of role-playing fantasy game activity; first edition; the looks as though it may be the most serious book on its subject so far; the author [born 1974] has "an M.A. in performance studies from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.") June 2001.

McKillop, Patricia A. **The Tower at Stony Wood.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00733-3, 294pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Y. Craft, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; in Ace Books' attractive small hardcover format, this title by the World Fantasy Award-winning author carries a 2000 copyright date, and has cover art dated 1999, and yet the publishers assure us it is a May 2001 first edition.) May 2001.

McMahon, Donna. **Dance of Knives.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87431-6, 416pp, hardcover, cover by Rob Alexander, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new Canadian writer; it's a thriller set in 22nd-century Vancouver.) 9th May 2001.

McMullen, Sean. **The Miocene Arrow.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87547-9, 416pp, trade paperback, cover by John Harris, no price shown [circa \$15]. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 160.) 23rd May 2001.

Mann, Phillip. **The Eye of the Queen.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07238-5, 264pp, C-format paper-

back, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1982; Mann's debut novel, the blurb describes it as an "utterly convincing evocation of an alien culture... one of the richest and most compelling first novels of the 1980s.") 19th April 2001.

Marco, John. **The Grand Design.** "Book Two of *Tyrants and Kings*." Gollancz, ISBN 1-86798-781-0, 755pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; another Big Commercial Fantasy by a fairly new American author; it was praised by a reviewer in the *British Fantasy Society Newsletter* as "a great read... a really good novel.") 12th April 2001.

Marco, John. **The Saints of the Sword.** "Book Three of *Tyrants and Kings*." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07160-5, 545pp, C-format paperback, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 19th April 2001.

Martin, George R. R. **Quartet: Four Tales from the Crossroads.** Edited by Christine Carpenito. Introduction by Melinda Snodgrass. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 1-886778-31-0, 447pp, hardcover, cover by Charles Vess, \$25. (Sf/horror/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains a previously unpublished [and unfinished] novel, "Black and White and Red All Over," from the mid-1980s, plus three later long pieces, "Skin Trade" [1988], "Starport" [1994; a TV screenplay] and "Blood of the Dragon" [1996; a Hugo-winning fantasy novella].) No date shown: received in April 2001.

Miller, Ron, and Frederick C. Durant, III. **The Art of Chesley Bonestell.** Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-884-3, 256pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Bonestell, £35. (Profusely illustrated study of the work of Chesley Bonestell [1888-1986], the famous American "space artist"; first edition; this is a big and beautiful

volume, devoted to the paintings of one of the most important of all sf illustrators; recommended.) 26th April 2001.

Muir, John Kenneth. **An Analytical Guide to Television's One Step Beyond, 1959-1961.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0969-X, x+302pp, hardcover, \$39.95. (Unillustrated, chronologically-arranged episode guide and critical study of the US sf/horror TV series; first edition; this is yet another book from the writer who seems to be setting himself up as the chronicler of all bygone sf TV series, however minor or downright bad they may have been – see his earlier books, all detailed here over the past three or four years, on *Space 1999*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Doctor Who*, *Blake's 7*, etc.) No date shown: received in April 2001.

Newman, Kim. **Dracula Cha Cha Cha: Anno Dracula 1959.** Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02209-1, 291pp, B-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA as *Anno Dracula* 1959, 1998; third in the "Anno Dracula" sequence; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 166.) 8th May 2001.

Pavlou, Stel. **Decipher.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-7432-0857-9, 616pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Near-future technothriller, first edition; set in the year 2012, involving polar secrets and the lost city of Atlantis, it appears to be yet another attempt to steal Michael Crichton's crown; the author is British [of Greek immigrant parents] and this is his debut novel; he also writes screenplays, including one for an imminent film entitled *The 51st State*; he sounds like a bright lad.) 8th May 2001.

Rayner, Jacqueline. **Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Squire's Crystal.** "Bernice Summerfield, 3." Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-13-0, 188pp, A-format paperback, cover by Carolyn Edwards, £6.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first edition; third in a new paperback-original series picking up from where Virgin Publishing's "New Adventures" left off.) April 2001.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Flightless Falcon.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-784-5, 323pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; "Mickey Zucker Reichert" is the form of her name used by American doctor and writer Miriam S. Zucker.) 12th April 2001.

Roberson, Jennifer, ed. **Out of Avalon: Tales of Old Magic and New Myths.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45831-1, ix+336pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jeff Barson, \$5.99. (Arthurian fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains all-original "Matter-of-Britain" fantasy stories by Marion Zimmer Bradley & Diana L. Paxson, Rosemary Edghill, David Farland, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Katharine Kerr, Tricia Sullivan, Judith Tarr, Eric Van Lustbader and others; although he's not named anywhere as co-editor, it's clearly another Martin H. Greenberg production [copyright shared by Tekno-Books, which is Greenberg's company].) May 2001.



Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **Stories for an Enchanted Afternoon.** Foreword by Kevin J. Anderson. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-02-9, xvi+284pp, hardcover, cover by Thomas Canty, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains eleven stories first published in magazines or anthologies between 1988 and 1999; although this is her first collection, the blurb tells us that Rusch has, astonishingly, "sold more than 50 novels"; for a writer who has been producing for not much more than a decade [and has spent half that time working as the editor of one of the field's leading magazines, *F&SF*], that's an output of positively Moorcockian proportions – and it spreads across sf, fantasy, horror, romantic fiction and crime fiction [in the last two genres she uses the pseudonyms Kristine Grayson and Kris Nelscott].) May 2001.

Simpson, M. J. **The Pocket Essential Hitchhiker's Guide.** Foreword by Simon Jones. "Pocket Essentials TV." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-40-4, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Reading guide to the humorous sf of Douglas Adams; first edition; since *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* began life as a cult radio show, and then became a series of books before making it onto television [briefly], it seems a little perverse of the publishers to classify this volume as "Pocket Essentials TV"; the author, M. J. Simpson, is a former deputy editor of *SFX* magazine, and obviously highly expert when it comes to the subject of Adams's writings.) 10th May 2001.

Steele, Allen. **Oceanspace.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00850-X, 375pp, A-format paperback, cover by Danilo Ducak, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the first new Allen Steele novel we have seen in some years [the hardcover passed us by], it's a futuristic undersea epic and is dedicated, "For Arthur C. Clarke.") May 2001.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Lloyd Biggle, Jr.: Musicologist and Oral Historian—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 53." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-57-2, ix+35pp, small-press paperback, £2. (Sf author bibliography; Biggle [born 1923] has become a somewhat obscure name in sf, but he published many novels in the 1960s and 1970s, and has been active in other fields since; Mr Stephensen-Payne's hard bibliographical labours are to be commended, as ever – readers will note that this is the 53rd such bibliography in the Galactic Central series, of which he is the publisher and [in most cases] the compiler.) April 2001.

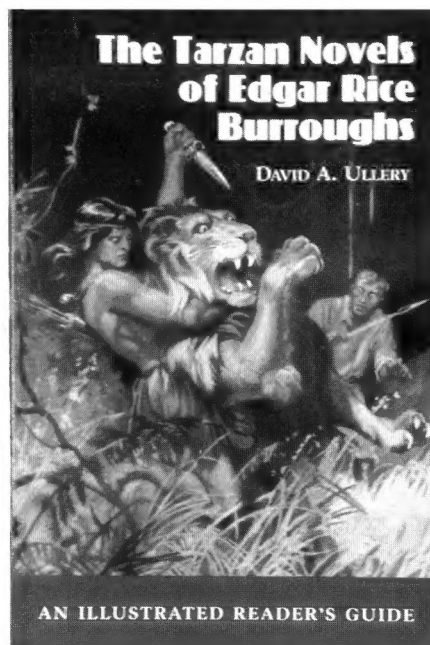
Sterling, Bruce. **A Good Old-Fashioned Future.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-710-1, 279pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1999; another Sterling opus slips out oddly unheralded in the UK, after a two-year delay – there was no hardcover edition in this country; it contains seven fine stories, all from the

1990s and all first published in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *F&SF* and *Omni*.) 12th April 2001.

Tenn, William. **Immodest Proposals: The Complete Science Fiction of William Tenn, Volume I.** Edited by James A. Mann and Mary C. Tabasko. Introduction by Connie Willis. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 1-886778-19-1, vii+618pp, hardcover, cover by H. R. Van Dongen, \$29. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains 33 witty stories by a generally underrated author who was associated with the "Galaxy school" of satirical sf in the 1950s; "William Tenn" is a pseudonym of American academic Philip Klass [born in London, 1920]; a second volume, to follow before the end of 2001, will contain the author's sole sf novel, *Of Men and Monsters* [1968], plus his remaining short stories; another commendable NESFA collection.) No date shown: received in April 2001.

Ullery, David A. **The Tarzan Novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs: An Illustrated Reader's Guide.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0825-1, vi+298pp, trade paperback, \$45. (Who's who and what's what of ERB's fantastic ape-man saga; first edition; this is an attractive-looking book but, disappointingly, it turns out to be a mere concordance [of lost cities, tribes, character names, invented languages, and the like], with plot summaries but without any evaluation; which were the best of ERB's 24 Tarzan titles, and which were the worst, and what are their qualities as narratives? – in 300 pages, Mr Ullery [born 1964] doesn't begin to tell us; the best critical evaluation of ERB's oeuvre remains that to be found in Richard A. Lupoff's *Edgar Rice Burroughs: Master of Adventure* [1965; revised 1968].) Late entry: March publication, received in April 2001.

Vallejo, Boris. **Mirage: New and Enlarged Edition.** Text by Nigel Suckling. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-909-2, 128pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Vallejo, £14.99.



(Erotic fantasy art portfolio, originally published in a slimmer edition in the USA, 1982; this is a beefing up of the first book by the popular Peruvian-born American artist who specializes in spectacularly muscular men and buxom women.) 24th May 2001.

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Ring of Five Dragons: Volume One of The Pearl.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87235-6, 576pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; a Big Commercial Fantasy by a veteran author; it seems to be set on another planet; the British edition, listed here last month, slightly precedes.) 21st May 2001.

Warren, Jim. **Painted Worlds.** Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-894-0, 112pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Warren, £20. (Fantasy art portfolio, first edition; Warren is an American artist who began working professionally in the 1970s; consisting of paintings done for the most part in photo-realistic style, the book contains no text apart from an introduction and captions by the artist himself.) 24th May 2001.

Williams, Conrad. **Nearly People.** Introduction by Michael Marshall Smith. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-18-8, 78pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Wieslaw Walkuski, £8. (Horror novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies.) Late entry: March publication, received in April 2001.

Williams, Liz. **The Ghost Sister.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-58374-3, 339pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the debut novel of a new British writer whose short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative* and elsewhere.) 26th June 2001.

Wilson, F. Paul. **Healer.** "A novel of the LaNague Federation." Stealth Press [336 College Ave., Lancaster, PA 17603, USA], ISBN 1-58881-008-9, vi+261pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1976; this was Wilson's debut novel, and presumably has been out of print for quite some time [he is better known these days as a writer of horror novels and medical thrillers]; it contains a new four-page preface by the author and an appended short story, "To Fill the Sea and Air"; see [www.stealthpress.com](http://www.stealthpress.com) for ordering information.) Late entry: January publication, received in April 2001.

Wolfe, Gene. **In Green's Jungles: Volume Two of The Book of the Short Sun.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87363-8, 384pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; second part of a trilogy which is itself a follow-up to the tetralogy "The Book of the Long Sun"; this edition is decorated with praise from Jonathan Carroll, Patrick O'Leary, Lucius Shepard, Brian Stableford and others; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 161.) 16th May 2001.



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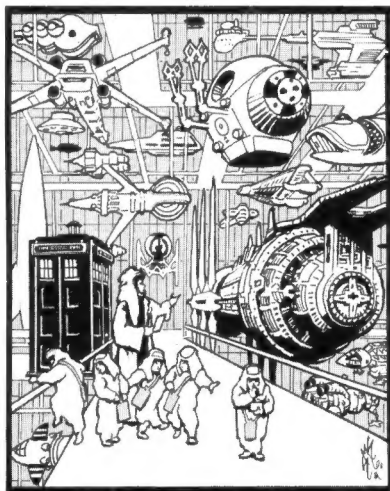
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